TABLETOP ROLE-PLAYING THERAPY

A GUIDE FOR THE CLINICIAN GAME MASTER

MEGAN A. CONNELL

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This e-book contains some places that ask the reader to fill in questions or comments. Please keep pen and paper handy as you read this e-book so that you can complete the exercises within.

For my family

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INTRODUCTION

The first tabletop role-playing game, or TTRPG, was *Dungeons & Dragons*, which was created in 1974 (Peterson, 2012). Ever since people first started telling stories and rolling dice, the variety of stories has grown, as has how players play and use TTRPGs. Many players give examples of how playing *D&D* helped them in their lives outside of the game. Even early research on those who play *D&D* noted that the game seemed to have benefits for players away from the table (Fine, 1983; Zayas & Lewis, 1986). For over a decade, professionals have been using TTRPGs, such as *D&D*, to achieve therapeutic goals (Berkenstock & Blakley, 2019). In the past five years more providers are using TTRPGs as therapeutic tools and more groups are offering training on how to use TTRPGs in practice; organizations such as the Bodhana Group, Geek Therapeutics, and Game to Grow (2018) all offer training programs for professionals (Connell, 2021).

This book seeks to explore why TTRPGs seem to lend themselves so well to therapy, as well as considering what research and other practices can be used as foundational material for using TTRPGs, the theoretical models supporting how to integrate TTRPGs into practice, and how one can utilize TTRPGs in their own practice. In essence, I will examine how to integrate therapeutic themes into games and how to use gameplay as a useful therapeutic tool.

TERMINOLOGY

Role-playing is one of the most popular gaming styles for video, tabletop gaming, and live-action gaming. The “TT” in TTRPG indicates that the game being discussed is played with humans, not code, running the game. Though modern video game RPGs were inspired by tabletop RPGs, the term RPG in the gaming community is usually associated with video games. Thus, when professionals discuss the use of tabletop RPGs, the full acronym TTRPG is

needed. However, for easier reading the acronym *RPG* will be used for the duration of this volume to indicate a TTRPG. If the author is discussing a video game RPG it will be annotated as such.

RPGs used for therapy will be referred to as *applied RPGs*. As with most specialty fields, there is a sizable amount of terminology that goes along with RPGs. There is a glossary of terms related to gaming and tabletop gaming at the end of this volume. The following are key terms we will be using here, including some that are specific to the subject of applied RPGs, along with short definitions.

Game Master (GM) refers to someone who is running an RPG. They can be thought of as the narrator of the story. In this book, the use of the term GM by itself indicates anyone who runs RPGs, not just someone who runs applied RPGs.

An *applied RPG* means a game that is being used as a tool to achieve goals that are unrelated to the game, such as the therapeutic goals that underlie the discussion of games in this book. An *applied RPG* provider refers to a therapist or other licensed healthcare provider who is using RPGs as a form of therapy.

An *applied game master (applied GM)* is one who runs an applied RPG. In the context of this book, the term applied GM may refer to the applied RPG provider who has convened the group of players and is also running the RPG, or it may refer to someone experienced in running RPGs whom the applied RPG provider has brought in to run a RPG on the therapist's behalf, under the therapist's supervision. Where it is important to distinguish between the provider-as-applied-GM and a non-provider applied GM, in particular, in the sections that discuss a licensed provider's legal and ethical obligations, this book will try to do so.

A *session* is a single meeting of a gaming group to play an RPG.

A *campaign* is a series of sessions conducted with the same players in which a full story has been told from start to finish.

A *player* refers to a person playing the game, while *character*, or *player character* (*PC*), refers to the character that they are controlling within the game. A *nonplayer character* (*NPC*) is a character that the GM is controlling.

A *module* is a prewritten gaming adventure, which is typically designed for a specific gaming system.

Miniatures, often called *minis*, are small figurines about 25 mm tall for humanoid characters and up to 190 mm for monsters. They are used on a map to indicate placement of the player characters and adversaries during a combat

encounter.

EXAMPLE GROUP

RPGs are best understood through observation and experience. As that is rather difficult to provide in the written word, an ongoing hypothetical example, using composite patients, is used throughout this text. This group consisted of four players, all girls, in a group designed to help address social anxiety and to teach assertiveness skills.

THE GAME

This group utilized the fifth edition of *Dungeons and Dragons* (*D&D*). Each session was 120 minutes in length and the campaign lasted for 10 weeks. The applied GM utilized acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) to describe goals and behavioral observations.

THE GROUP MEMBERS

Player 1: Julie, age 16, diagnosed with social anxiety. She has a history of being bullied. She is playing a half-elf rogue named Adyra.
Player 2: Cara, age 14, diagnosed with anxiety and ASD. She is playing a dragonborn bard named Urza.
Player 3: Maura, age 15, diagnosed with anxiety and ADHD. She is playing a halfling barbarian named Keira.
Player 4: Olivia, age 17, diagnosed with social anxiety. She is playing an aasimar cleric named Dina.

There is one applied GM running the group.

The players elected to call their adventuring party “Half Pint” because they

had been discussing their favorite half pint ice creams during character creation. Each player chose a favorite ice cream flavor for their character.

TABLETOP ROLE-PLAYING THERAPY

PART 1:

The Foundation

1

What Is a Tabletop Role-Playing Game?

DEFINITION AND TERMS

Role-playing games (RPGs) are broadly games in which players take on the role of a character within the world of the game, and there are no clear win or lose conditions (Lasley, 2020; Waskul, 2006). The first, and most well-known, RPG is *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*). This game was first published in 1974 and has been revised a number of times. It is currently in its fifth edition, which is referred to as *5e* (Lasley, 2020). Today there are hundreds of different RPG gaming systems, but at their core they all share a few similarities.

In most RPGs there will be one player who acts as the narrator of the story. The title of this role varies depending on the game: it could be called the Dungeon Master, game master, story teller, or even narrator. For the sake of this work this role is called the *game master*, or *GM*. The other players in the game will be taking on the role of characters that only exist within the world of the game. These characters are referred to as *player characters* or *PCs*.

The GM narrates the situation the PCs find themselves in. The players respond with how their characters react. Typically, dice or another method is used to determine the outcomes of the PCs' actions within the game. Thus, a tabletop RPG is a game in which typically one player acts as the narrator and the other players take on the role as the main characters in a story that is being told communally through the actions of the PCs within the world of the game.

GAMEPLAY

Descriptions of gameplay of RPGs generally do not sufficiently capture what

occurs around the table. If one is a total novice to RPGs, it is recommended that they first observe some games either at a live event, such as at a local gaming store, or through recorded games on YouTube or Twitch. Wizards of the Coast, the company that publishes *D&D*, has several sponsored games available on their YouTube channel and the company Geek & Sundry, through its Nerdist channel, has a series called CelebriD&D where different celebrities sit down to play a game of *D&D* with those who play often (Dungeons & Dragons, n.d.). Such games are particularly helpful as the GM is often explaining the rules as the game is played.

In a typical RPG session, the GM will start off by either having one of the players give a recap of the previous session or doing the recap themselves. Following the recap, the GM will either narrate the current scene the PCs are in or ask the players what their next move will be. The players will discuss and provide information about the actions of their PCs. The GM then will do one of two things. For more mundane things, like a PC walking in a cave, the GM will narrate the outcomes of their actions. Whereas for actions that could either succeed or fail, the GM will ask the player to roll a die, and depending on the outcome of the roll, the PC may be succeed spectacularly, succeed, barely make it, fail slightly, or utterly fail. Typically, the GM has an idea of what they would like the players to do or experience during the game; however, players might go in a completely different direction to what the GM had in mind. The session ends either when the story reaches a good ending point, or the set time for the meeting of that session has expired.

There are three primary pillars of play that are utilized in RPGs. These pillars are exploration, role-play, and combat (Mearls & Crawford, 2014b). *Exploration* is when the PCs go out, explore, and learn about the world. This can be in the form of taking time to learn about a new culture, exploring ruins and learning about their history, or navigating through the wilds. *Role-play encounters* occur when the players are speaking in character either to one another or to the GM. Role-play encounters could include PCs talking through a plan, asking NPCs for information, or other social encounters. *Combat encounters* are when the PCs are in a conflict with other beings or the environment. Such conflict can include fighting, traps, or natural hazards. Most gaming sessions do not address all three pillars of play and will typically primarily focus on one pillar per session with a second being featured. Each pillar provides great opportunities for the applied GM to weave in different elements to their story.

When learning how to play and run RPGs it is advisable to play as a PC first

under the tutelage of an experienced GM who can help teach the rules and encounters of the game. Once one is comfortable as a player then it is advisable to start running *one-shots* (a full campaign that is limited to a single session), or short campaigns for friends. After overseeing a shorter campaign, the next step may be to try running a prewritten campaign called a *module*. Many GMs do not ever engage in world building and continue their careers as GMs through running modules. Still other GMs enjoy building their own world to run games in. GMs will also want to consider how comfortable they are with improvisation in play. Sticking to the story without improvisation is often called playing on the rails. Other GMs might be more comfortable with the story going to unexpected places and having the world of the game react to the actions of the players, often called a sandbox approach. Both forms of play have their own strengths and weaknesses.

It is strongly recommended that one become comfortable with running games for their friends or in their local game store before trying to run a therapeutic game. As will be discussed later in the book, the applied GM needs to be focusing on what is happening at the table rather than on the rules of the game they are running. An applied GM should feel comfortable enough that they do not need to put much conscious thought into the mechanics of the game they are managing.

For more information about running and playing RPGs the following resources are recommended:

Your Best Game Ever (2019) by Monte Cook
The Ultimate RPG Gameplay Guide (2019) by James D'Amato
Wizards of the Coast on YouTube for actual play examples (https://www.youtube.com/c/DNDWizards)
CelebriD&D series on YouTube (https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PL7atuZxmT955LFP-Lw16OkRgkM6P0Gk_r)

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Foundations

Before the specifics of using tabletop RPGs in therapy can be discussed, additional terms and underlying ideas need to be defined. RPGs are a structured form of play. To understand games, one must first understand what play is. There is a strong relationship between games and learning, and this relationship is foundational to the applied use of RPGs. In RPGs, one engages in role-play, which can foster a sense of immersion; through immersion, players might experience a flow state, or experience bleed. All of the above terms are important and thus each will be reviewed in detail below.

GAMES, PLAY, AND LEARNING

Though humans are not the only creatures who play, people do seem to have a need for play in their lives. Sociologist Johan Huizinga even proposed that humans be labeled as *Homo laden*, meaning man the player, as our civilizations are focused around play (as cited in Bergen, 2009). Every culture has games, and these games can be a method of preserving cultural history (Begy, 2015; Danilovic & de Voogt, 2021; Ilieva, 2012). At its heart, play is a form of experiencing fun and enjoyment (Bergen, 2009). Games are an activity in which the participants, or players, have an objective that they find desirable and wish to achieve (Juul, 2003). While many games are played as a form of play and fun, not all games are thought of as fun. Indeed, there are studies of games that arguably are not fun but instead are highly emotional, yet players still enjoyed the experience of playing such games (Montola & Holopainen, 2012; Roth, 2015; Smethurst & Craps, 2014). Games in this way are similar to art in that they provide a space in which one can experience a wide array of emotions

(Smuts, 2007). So, while most games are fun, fun does not seem to be a requirement for an activity to be a game. Yet play and games do seem to be linked.

Many games create a sense of playfulness, or a state in which one can experience cognitive, physical, and social spontaneity and experience joy and humor (Bergen, 2009). Being playful seems to help foster creativity and learning (Bergen, 2009; Bowman, 2010). Theories of learning from Piaget and Vygotsky hold that play is one of the most important activities that children can engage in to help them learn (Mooney, 2013; Okocha, 2016). Play is a sequential activity. As one ages play becomes more involved and complex (Howes & Matheson, 1992). Thus, it is reasonable to look to play and games as a method of learning not just academic skills, but social and emotional skills as well (Atanasio, 2020; Davis & Johns, 2020). Social skills are defined as being the skills needed to effectively function within social contexts (Cavell, 1990). Emotional skills refer to an individual's ability to regulate their own emotions as they arise in an age-appropriate manner.

Bringing play and games into traditionally serious settings, such as work or educational environments, has become more popular in recent years. This seems a result of increasing numbers of studies on how play and gaming can positively impact learning. With play and learning it is important that play feel natural to the setting and not forced (Crow & Nelson, 2015; Kultima et al., 2010; Powell, 2022). Thus, it can become a balancing act, using play to gain the creative benefits, but this cannot be done in such a way that the fun feels forced or inauthentic. Part of what might be hindering the use of play in a work or learning setting is that it can be difficult to understand where work attitudes and expectations end and where play begins. As noted by Kirkpatrick (2015) there are times where using gaming mechanics is not appropriate. One must evaluate situations to determine if using gaming mechanics or activities is appropriate in a given situation.

When engaged in a play activity there are certain rules and expectations that hold true while playing but not when living in one's day-to-day life. This space where game rules take precedence is referred to as the *magic circle* (Bowman & Schrier, 2018; Hook, 2012; Salen & Zimmerman, 2004; Schallegger, 2018; Stenros & Bowman, 2018; Tekinbas¸ & Zimmerman, 2003). The magic circle is used for sporting events, tabletop games, and all other forms of play. The function of the magic circle is to create a separation between our day-to-day lives and our gaming lives. For example, in a routine day it is not acceptable to

hit other people, yet in the magic circle of the boxing ring hitting others is the expected behavior. The magic circle essentially communicates a change in the rules and expectations in which one engages. Having such a framework is important especially for those engaging in role-playing.

ROLE-PLAYING AND ROLE-PLAYING GAMES

There are many definitions of what role-playing, and RPGs, are and are not (Arjoranta, 2011; Bowman, 2010, 2012; de los Angeles, 2016; Deterding & Zagal, 2018; Hitchens & Drachen, 2009; Lankoski and Järvelä, 2012; Williams et al., 2011). What exactly is role-playing? As cited by Arjoranta (2011), Henriksen noted that when one engages in role-play, they do so through immersion into a role that allows the player to engage and interact with a fictitious world. Or more simply when one is role-playing, they put themselves in the headspace of another person (de los Angeles, 2016). Role-playing can be seen as controlling a character over which the player has a large amount of narrative control (Fuist, 2012). Another way to conceptualize role-playing is to view it as a way to create an experience of narrative agency (Pettersson, 2006). In his qualitative study of RPG players Fine (1983) noted that role-playing seemed to be an art form. When looking at all of these definitions it seems that role-playing occurs when a player is actively engaging in controlling and interacting with a gaming world while playing as a character that exists in that world.

What then is an RPG? Though on the surface this seems like an easy question to answer, there are many types of games that fall under the role-playing banner from RPGs, such as *D&D*, to video games, such as *World of Warcraft* or *The Legend of Zelda* series, to board games, such as *Forbidden Island* or *Charterstone*. Hitchens and Drachen (2009) noted that for a game to be considered an RPG it needed to contain a game world in which there were participants in the form of PCs as well as NPCs, a GM who interacts between the gaming world and the PCs, and a narrative flow to the game. However, even the authors noted that their definition did not create clear boundaries, and instead served more like guidelines for what could be considered an RPG (Hitchens & Drachen, 2009). Montola (2008) focused more on the differing power levels that occur within an RPG to help build his definition. Each participant in an RPG has some degree of power and influence within the interactive environment of the

game (Montola, 2008; Pohjola, n.d.). Arjoranta (2011) noted that for a game to be considered an RPG there must be a world in which the game takes place and there needs to be some narrative control on the part of the player, a character which the player controls. Fuist's (2012) definition of an RPG is in alignment with Arjoranta. The definitions above allow both video and tabletop games to be considered as RPGs. The definitions also suggest that RPGs exist more on a continuum rather than having firm boundaries between what is and is not an RPG.

Given that there is no agreed upon definition of either role-playing or RPGs, when such terms are used within this volume it shall mean the following: *Role-playing* is when a player is controlling a character that lives within an agreed upon gaming world and has narrative control over the actions of their character. An *RPG* is a game that consists of a gaming world where narrative control is shared between the GM and PCs who exist within the world of the game.

IMMERSION

One of the reasons role-playing seems to be such a powerful tool is that it is often an immersive experience (Mello, 2006; Schallegger, 2018). White et al. (2012) outlined eight aspects that have been associated with an immersive experience for players. Each aspect on its own could be seen as a form of immersion. Most immersive experiences involve two or more of the following: the player emotionally identifying with their character, the player having a sense of locus of control within the gaming world, experiencing a flow state, channeling the character and the character's desires, being immersed in the story, at times experiencing a trancelike state, feeling an emotional bond with the character, and undergoing cathartic reactions to gameplay (White et al., 2012). Often players will experience different forms of immersion at different times, depending on what is occurring in the story.

Emotional reactions to events within the story are common and these emotions are felt within the body. Even though the player knows and understands that what is occurring is fictional, the emotional experience is real (Bowman & Lieberoth, 2018). Indeed, the immersive shared experience can bring about group cohesion (Grouling Cover, 2010). Much like a group surviving and thriving through difficult times, the players can forge similar bonds through the actions of their characters.

A 2018 chapter by Bowman describes the concept of immersion specifically in RPGs. In her chapter, Bowman noted that the key concepts associated with being immersed in a game are flow, engagement, involvement, absorption, transportation, presence, engrossment, and dissociation (Bowman, 2018). *Flow* is when a person is presented with challenges that they have the ability to overcome with the tools/skills that they already possess (Bowman, 2018; Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). In his research on flow, Csikszentmihalyi argued that it is the happiest mindset that a human can be in.

Engagement indicates how invested one is with an activity. The more engaged a person is in a game, the more immersed they will be in the experience, whereas *involvement* speaks to the actions that one takes in order to be a part of an activity (Bowman, 2018). For example, if one enjoys baseball, they can be engaged by watching a baseball game, but they become involved by joining a local team. *Absorption* is the altered state of consciousness the individual enters when they are imagining the activity that they are absorbed in (Bowman, 2018). *Transportation* is how the narration of the story or activity can mentally take one away from their current environment and into a new one (Bowman, 2018). *Presence* indicates how immersed one is in the moment of the activity; this can also be thought of as being in a mindful state (Bowman, 2018). *Engrossment* is when the players of a game all agree upon the suspension of disbelief required to engage in the gaming world (Bowman, 2018). *Dissociation* is how one can temporarily feel detached from reality while engaged in the immersive activity (Bowman, 2018).

When the above come together one can experience a feeling of being totally immersed in an activity or event (Bowman, 2018). Bowman (2018) notes that there are six general categories of immersion: immersion in the activity, in the game, in the environment, in the narrative, in the character, and in the community (Bowman, 2018). Being immersed in the activity is about physically engaging with the activity in some way; this can be rolling dice, making costumes, or learning a dance (Bowman, 2018). Being immersed into the game is the players agreeing to adhere to the rules and goals of the gaming states (Bowman, 2018). Immersion into the environment is when the players are exploring the world of the game. Environmental immersion is most often discussed with regard to video games where players traverse digital spaces. However, in RPGs players can ask the GM to narrate any part of the world their characters explore, so it is likely that this type of immersion is also present in RPGs (Bowman, 2018). Immersion into the narrative differs from immersion

into the environment as when one is immersed within the narrative, they are engaging with the story that is being told rather than just with the world of the game (Bowman, 2018). Immersion into the narrative can be seen in more passive activities, such as watching a TV show or film. Many fandoms are the result of fans coming together to discuss and theorize about the story they have been enjoying (Bowman, 2018).

Immersion into the character is likely one of the key components for the applied GM. Immersion into the character speaks to understanding the wants and needs of a character even as they differ from the wants and needs of the player. When one is immersed in their character, they will often experience the emotions of the character; thus the high and low points of the game often end up being very cathartic for the player (Bowman, 2018). When players are immersed into the character, they might experience the game world both from the character's perspective and from their own observational perspective; this double experience is called *aesthetic doubling* in drama therapy or *double consciousness* in gaming theory (Bowman, 2018). Immersion into the character seems to be one of the factors that can influence how much or how little bleed (discussed below) the player experiences during the course of play (Bowman, 2018).

Finally, immersion into the community refers to the interactions and involvement that one has with others in the gaming or fandom space (Bowman, 2018). There are multiple ways that players can embed themselves in their community, such as spending time at the gaming table or going to conventions. Being a part of a community and community involvement seem to be central to playing an RPG (Bowman, 2018). That's why it is so critical that the applied GM bring immersive elements to their game.

Immersion can be understood as a form of being absorbed in an activity. Research on being absorbed in fictional stories has shown that reading can increase empathy (Kaufman & Libby, 2012; Mar et al., 2009). The more a reader identified with the characters, the more open they became to learning lessons from the character's experience within the story (Mar et al., 2009). It then stands to reason that playing an RPG likely could offer at least the same—if not more—empathy building than reading a book with characters the reader can identify with. Indeed, it seems that to even engage in role-playing one must have at least some skill in empathy (Nephew, 2006). RPGs have much overlap with stories; however, unlike stories where the participant is the reader, in RPGs the participant is an active player who can actively change the narrative flow of the story (Kim, 2004; White, 2011).

FLOW

During his career, Csikszentmihalyi sought to understand what it is that creates happiness in people. He argued that people were happiest when in what he called a state of *flow*. Flow is often found when one is struggling to overcome challenges utilizing their skills and talents (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Another way to understand flow is as those moments when one is working at the limits of their ability and pushing themselves to new heights (McGonigal, 2011). In RPGs the players are often presented with challenges or puzzles that they must overcome as a group. The solutions that the players bring forth can often include creatively employing the resources that they have at hand.

As noted by Bowman and Standiford (2016), to be in a flow state one must be free from distractions both external and internal. While role-playing many players become immersed in being their character. They may enter into a state of aesthetic doubling. While in this state the player is aware of both their experiences and the experiences of the character. Such feelings can allow for the player to have increased emotional awareness of what their character is feeling (Bowman & Standiford, 2016). Many players note a feeling of catharsis from being in such a state.

Though encountering challenges in an RPG will not always bring about a flow state, it does give players the opportunity to engage in such a state, especially when fully immersed within the story of the game. Flow also seems to be a state in which people are able to grow, learn, and change. Therefore, helping players enter into a flow state can be a powerful tool for the applied GM. Immersion and flow can help players have more of an emotional connection with the story; where there is an emotional connection, bleed is more likely to occur.

BLEED

Bleed is the term used to describe how feelings and skills can move between the player and their character (Bowman, 2010; Bowman, 2013; Bowman & Lieberoth, 2018; Leonard & Thurman, 2018; Montola, 2010). Within the concept of bleed, there are two additional terms to be aware of: bleed-in and bleed-out. These terms were popularized by Sarah Lynn Bowman (2010). When playing RPGs, players often note how while in the process of being their characters, they are able to learn. Likely bleed is one of the reasons such learning occurs.

Bleed-in describes when skills or emotions go from player to character (Bowman, 2010; Bowman, 2013; Bowman & Lieberoth 2018; Leonard & Thurman, 2018; Montola, 2010). This often takes the form of the player feeling a strong emotion—silly, angry, or even anxious—and though their character is not feeling that way, the player will role-play them as if they are. Skills, such as knowing military tactics, can also bleed from the player into the character, in that the player might know and use tactics that there is no reason for their character to also be versed in.

Bleed-out is when the emotions or knowledge go from the character to player (Bowman, 2010; Bowman, 2013; Bowman & Lieberoth 2018; Leonard & Thurman, 2018). The emotional growth that the player experiences from role-playing their character is the basis for bleed-out. The behavior goes out from the character into the player's day-to-day life.

Bleed-out can take the form of the player feeling sad when an NPC the character was close to dies, or a player feeling happy because there was a satisfying conclusion for their character in the game. Objectively nothing happened physically to the player to create the good or bad feelings, they all happened to the character, yet those feelings can bleed-out from the character into the player.

Bleed is an important concept for the applied GM as it is likely one of the primary agents of change for those in applied RPG groups. Understanding that bleed occurs and deducing how to use bleed to help players grow is important. Further, as bleed can also cause a strong emotional response in players, it is something that needs to be directly addressed in the informed consent process.

CONCLUSION

Applied RPGs are an immersive form of play that provide players with the opportunity to enter into a flow state in which they might experience emotional and psychological growth through bleed-in and bleed-out. Understanding these principles is central to understanding how applied RPGs operate and how to use them to their greatest potential. Now that there is comprehension of the foundational principles, let us start to explore in more detail why one would choose to use RPGs in therapy.

3

Why Use Tabletop Role-Playing Games?

There are many different interventions and therapy styles available to use with a wide array of diagnoses. Why then would a provider choose to use tabletop role-playing games (RPGs)? This chapter seeks to answer this question through examination of the foundations of group therapy, and to show how group therapy overlaps with applied RPGs. This will be followed by closer examination of how to utilize special interests, characters, role-playing, flow, and creative problem-solving with peers to aid in the therapeutic process.

RPGs AS GROUP THERAPY

Group therapy is a well-established form of effective evidence-based therapy, and has been found to be an effective method of therapy in a wide variety of settings (Bantjes et al., 2021; Barkowski et al., 2020; Pozza & Dèttore, 2017; Yalom & Leszcz, 2020). Though group therapy is used heavily for some disorders, such as addiction, it can be more difficult to find groups to help with anxiety, depression, and social skills. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to review all the reasons why group therapy can be effective; however, it is important to establish how RPGs can tap into those core elements that make group therapy effective.

As noted by Yalom and Leszcz (2020), there are 11 factors that facilitate change in group therapy:

1. Instillation of hope
2. Universality
3. Imparting information

4. Altruism
5. The corrective recapitulation of the primary family group
6. Development of socializing techniques
7. Imitative behavior
8. Interpersonal learning
9. Group cohesiveness
10. Catharsis
11. Existential factors

SHARED GOALS AND SHARED EXPERIENCES

According to Yalom and Leszcz (2020), groups can almost seamlessly bring about instillation of hope and universality just by having the group members come together. Those in a group are all there for similar reasons, and each member can meet others who are on different parts of their healing journey. Group members are given the chance to see how they used to function, and how much more they can change and grow, simply by watching this happen with other group members. An applied RPG group is no different. Group members are around those with common interests, some who have been working for years on their issues, and some who have just begun. Simply being around such individuals can be incredibly helpful in starting the healing process.

Being with those who have similar experiences can help group members not feel so alone, and for many it can help them feel more comfortable confronting what they need to work on (Yalom & Leszcz, 2020). Additionally, as the group members are all working toward similar goals, they can help one another as they figure out techniques to help them achieve their goals.

The advice and guidance offered by participants to one another is often cited as something that is very helpful, even if the advice and guidance is not followed (Yalom & Leszcz, 2020). In the applied use of RPGs, players are encouraged to help one another throughout the game. Players can give one another guidance on how to interact in social situations, they can strategize battle plans, or they can provide help in solving puzzles. This work helps the players practice asking for, giving, and receiving assistance. Often such help and support can be altruistic in nature, thus blending into the fourth aspect of group therapy.

When playing, players can mentor and assist one another, doing so gives the mentoring player the opportunity to experience *naches*, a Yiddish word meaning

bursting with pride (McGonigal, 2011). Having moments of naches likely will increase the feelings and experience of altruism. Mentoring and helping one another can add to the sense of the group operating like a family, which in turn can assist with group cohesiveness and interpersonal learning. Moments of naches might also lead to experiences of catharsis. Learning also occurs through players imitating what they see their group peers doing and through role-playing their character (Bowman, 2010; Crow & Nelson, 2015; de los Angeles, 2016; Hammer et al., 2018; Meriläinen, 2012).

A challenge in any learning situation is ensuring that lessons are recalled. When memories are tied to emotional experiences they tend to be more easily recalled than memories that lack emotional content (Levine & Pizarro, 2004). One central piece that applied RPGs offer to members that traditional groups (outside of the psychodrama) can lack is creating highly memorable narrative moments. Such moments can present opportunities for catharsis, which also has been attributed toward the effectiveness of group therapy (Yalom & Leszcz, 2020). When PCs go on a quest together the players often create highly detailed and personally meaningful memories that they will discuss and recall for years to come (Bowman & Lieberoth, 2018).

For example, imagine a group in which the facilitator was trying to teach the group members how to set and enforce boundaries. In a traditional group therapy setting this could be done using educational tactics with discussing boundaries and perhaps even having the participants role-play as themselves establishing boundaries with other group members. There could be process elements where participants discuss times they have successfully or unsuccessfully enforced boundaries in their lives. Though such a method might work for some, the lessons might not lead to lasting changes for the group members. In an applied RPG group, teaching and enforcing boundaries could be done through having a PC face an NPC who is behaving dismissively and who pushes on the PC's boundaries. The narrative pull of the story can help increase the chance that the player will have their PC enforce their boundaries and stand up for themselves, as it is the character, not the player, enforcing the boundary.

In the example group, the applied GM created a male NPC named Halgen who continually ignored requests made by the PCs. He would help when not asked, and as a result often created more problems for the PCs. During one encounter when Halgen arrived to give his help and guidance, Julie reacted (as her character Adyra) by saying "Halgen, we understand you want to help. We have this situation under control. If you actually want to help, you can go and

warn the city guard of this attack. We are more than capable of handling this, but we cannot do so and also warn the city." The other group members added support for Adyra in their character's voices. The applied GM noted that Adyra's actions were successful but to roll a persuasion check with advantage to see just how successful they were. Following this encounter the group processed what it felt like to firmly enforce a boundary and to be listened to. Julie noted that in her day-to-day life she had never stood up for herself like that and discussed what it felt like to finally do so.

Because an RPG is a story, this allows for players to experience and reenact real or imagined situations from their lives. Such reenactments occur within the confines of the magic circle, meaning that they do not spill over into the players' day-to-day lives. Such incidences can provide wonderful opportunities for imitation and interpersonal learning in ways that other forms of therapy might struggle to achieve.

SPECIAL INTERESTS

By using special interests professionals can help ensure that participants continue with therapy. A study by Kelly (2015) demonstrated that for those on the autism spectrum, using special interests significantly improved treatment outcomes when compared to treatment as usual. It is reasonable to assume that utilizing special interests, or interventions that the client finds intrinsically rewarding, could have a positive impact on engagement with treatment for any diagnosis, not just autism.

Moreover, the flexibility of RPGs allows for games to adapt to a number of special interests. While *D&D* is more of a traditional high fantasy setting; the game *Kids on Bikes* captures the feel of a 1980s sci-fi film; while the Cypher System is adaptable to a number of genres including fantasy, sci-fi, superheroes, and fairy tales. Such flexibility means that the GM can create a game that has spaceships, pirates, or anime-style weapons, all in one game. RPGs seem uniquely adaptable for the use of special interests in play. Not only will using special interests likely increase engagement but it might also have a secondary benefit of making the intervention fun.

MAKING THERAPY FUN

There is growing research that demonstrates the importance of fun and play in our daily lives (Grech, 2020; McGonigal, 2011; Montola, 2010; Wendt et al., 2021). Too often as a culture people associate things that are fun with only being for children (Deterding, 2018; Grech, 2020). Yet throughout history play is seen as being a common, and even necessary activity for adults (Atanasio, 2020; Bergen, 2009). Additionally, the function of fun and play in learning has been well established (Begy, 2015; Bergen, 2009; Blackstock, 2016; Bowman, 2010; Daniau, 2016; de los Angeles, 2016; Dormann et al., 2013; Ferrara, 2013; Hellström, 2016; Mooney, 2013; Schrier, 2019; Weiner, 2018; Zayas & Lewis, 1986).

There have been a number of therapists who have tried to utilize fun and play as a learning tool for therapy through the creation of therapy games. Board games, such as *The Talking, Feeling & Doing Game*, *Social Skills Group Activities*, and *The Coping Skills Game*, all seek to teach psychological skills through gameplay. The problem is most of these games are not designed by game designers, but by therapists. While they can be effective tools, they are not often an activity that someone with a free hour would pick. Perhaps one of the biggest challenges with such games is that the goal is unclear. Is the purpose of the game to win or to learn a therapy skill?

In her book *Reality Is Broken* (2011), Jane McGonigal seeks to explore what it is about gaming that pulls us in and is so enjoyable. She noted that a game has four main components: a clear goal, rules, a feedback system, and voluntary participation (McGonigal, 2011). Part of what makes games fun is having players face unnecessary obstacles and learn how to overcome such obstacles. Indeed, it seems people crave the ability to engage in problem-solving and overcoming trials, and doing so stimulates the reward pathways of the brain. In short, playing games challenges humans in a way that is adaptive and rewarding as few other activities are (McGonigal, 2011). Having a fun task can increase intrinsic motivation, which in turn increases the likelihood that someone will engage with the activity.

When engaged in an RPG the players are asked to actively play. As noted in an essay by Eric Campbell (2019), when everyone in a group is focused on play, the focus is on each player's experience rather than each player's insecurities. Building a shared narrative with friends is a risk, it creates vulnerability, but it also opens one up for an incredibly enjoyable experience (Campbell, 2019). Matt Colville, a *D&D* YouTuber, has said that he believes playing *D&D* is the most fun you can have with your brain (2016). Fun is rewarding; tasks that are

rewarding are more likely to cause individuals to feel motivated to continue engaging in such tasks.

MOTIVATION

For any therapeutic intervention to be effective the targeted population needs to engage with the intervention. It does not matter that a new intervention is going to create the most positive outcomes for an individual. If that person is unwilling to partake in treatment, it will not be effective. Getting individuals to stay in therapy can be quite difficult. For example, there are many effective treatments for trauma; however, research has demonstrated that between 13–60% of those in treatment for posttraumatic stress disorder will drop out of treatment early (Acierno et al., 2021; Shulman et al., 2019). Consequently, it does not matter how effective a therapy is if clients do not engage with the treatment, no significant improvement can occur.

Using a game as a tool for therapy can help increase a participant's motivation to be engaged with therapy. Motivation will either come from within, *intrinsic*, or from outside, *extrinsic*. Typically, intrinsic motivation is more powerful than extrinsic motivation (McGonigal, 2011; Wendt et al., 2021).

For many who are in therapy the reasons for being there can be more extrinsic. Individuals might be in therapy because they were asked to come by their family. Some do not even know why others want them to be in therapy. Some might know that they are supposed to learn skills, but they might not agree with the assessment that they need to learn or change. Even if the participant recognizes that learning new skills will ultimately help them in their life, their motivation to do so can be rather low.

As noted above playing games is often an intrinsically rewarding task. RPGs are highly popular, and are selling better than they ever have in the past (Whitten, 2021). Thus, the challenge is for the therapist to pair the intrinsically rewarding task of playing an RPG with the extrinsic goal of learning therapy skills. If the applied GM is able to do so, it is likely that participants will be more engaged and more likely to learn the skills being presented. As of the writing of this book, no studies have been completed comparing skills learned from treatment as usual versus skills learned through applied RPGs. Though more research is needed, there is evidence to suggest that applied RPGs are an effective therapy tool. Specifically, more applied RPG groups are starting across

the world, and applied GMs are having little to no difficulty finding participants to fill their groups.

Those who run applied RPG groups note that their dropout rates are low, and that their groups tend to fill rather quickly. Such evidence is suggestive that applied RPGs can be an effective tool as participants are willing to attend groups that use RPGs. Having clients choose to participate in applied RPGs can be highly beneficial to their treatment as they are more likely to be actively engaged.

As of the writing of this book, no formalized studies have been done on the dropout rates of group members in applied RPG groups. In this author's experience, only 1 out of over 50 group members has ever dropped out of therapy, and that member only left due to being physically unable to attend the group. Though such information is anecdotal, it is suggestive that those clients who attend applied RPG groups might have better outcomes simply due to attending sessions and engaging with the content. Again, research is needed to test this hypothesis.

ROLE-PLAYING

Role-playing can be an effective method of creating measurable change for therapeutic goals. For example, when learning specific social skills, role-playing in a controlled setting is a great way to practice these skills (Daniau, 2016; de los Angeles, 2016; Homann & White, 2020; Meriläinen, 2012; Rosselet & Stauffer, 2013; Zayas & Lewis, 1986). Again, getting clients to engage in role-playing can be difficult when they are role-playing as themselves in a situation. When clients are able to role-play as a character there seems to be less hesitation to engage with the scenario (Crow & Nelson, 2015).

Having a character to play can help to facilitate role-playing for the player. A player who might feel hesitant to role-play a conversation as themselves might have little to no issue doing so as their character. Role-playing might be the most easily viewable and measurable aspect of how RPGs work for therapy.

ELEMENTS SPECIFIC TO APPLIED RPGs

In an RPG a therapist can take all of the above—the benefits of group therapy,

shared goals and experiences, special interests, fun, and role-playing—and weave it all together into one experience. Doing so is not easy, yet the very format of RPGs lends itself well to bringing together these various components. Therefore, it seems that RPGs provide a powerful tool for therapists to use with their clients. The game aspect of an RPG is important, and RPGs do fit McGonigal's definition of what a game is (2011). Players choose to play and to engage at the table, there is a clear set of rules that is used in the game, players are awarded experience points (explained later in the chapter) for how their characters perform, and the group has a clear goal of what their characters are trying to achieve.

As previously noted, games are fun, in part because of the players facing obstacles and needing to overcome them. The applied GM can create challenges that are customized to the specific skills and needs of the group. This allows for the players to mentor and help one another. By encouraging players to engage in mentoring, they are more likely to experience naches. Through providing increasingly difficult challenges, the applied GM can help the group experience what McGonigal refers to as *fiero*, the rush that one feels when they experience an epic win (2011).

RPGs can bring together the benefits of group therapy, using a special interest/intrinsically rewarding task, together with an easily adaptable play format that provides opportunities for role-playing that clients are likely to engage with. Three of the core elements of RPGs that seem the most helpful are the use of characters, story, and game mechanics.

CHARACTERS

When the player creates a character, they are making an avatar, or a proxy, that will act as them in the gaming world. This character is a creation of the player that is not the player. From observing players, it seems that most are able to see their characters, and the experiences of their characters, as something separate from themselves. Many will make an aspirational character that has skills or abilities that the player feels as though they are lacking. This aspirational self can help the player discover what life might be like should they actually have those skills.

Characters also can give players a buy-in for participating in the group. A player will likely be asked to create a backstory for their character and to explain

why that character is out exploring the world. The GM can weave elements of the character's backstory into the narrative to help the player find reasons to explore the story and engage with what is occurring within the game. Again, exploring one's creative narrative can be more rewarding than just going along with a story where the player has no buy-in.

Research seems to suggest that using a character is an effective method of having the player learn skills. As the character gains new skills, so too does the player as their internal experience is similar to what they would face if they were the one engaging in the experience themselves (Daniau, 2016; Homann & White, 2020; Rose-Krasnor, 1997; Zayas & Lewis, 1986). Such findings indicate that while players know that they are playing a character and that their character and the situation are not real, the experience can still feel real to the player (Bowman & Lieberoth, 2018). As discussed previously this concept of experiencing the emotions of the character is called bleed and it seems to be one of the primary mechanisms of change the applied GM can utilize in their games.

STORY

A strength of applied RPGs is the use of story as a tool to help engage players and teach and demonstrate the usefulness of different skills. The story in an RPG is adaptable and changes depending upon the actions of the players. Even if a GM is running a pregenerated module, how the players interact with that story will result in changes in the narrative. The players' choices lead to different outcomes. The story can also be modified to ensure that it taps into the needs and intents of the group members.

For example, the applied GM might want the players to encounter a dragon. For a group focused on problem-solving and working together, the focus might be on fighting the dragon and getting around the traps in its lair. For a group focused on advocacy and speaking up, the focus might be to talk their way past the dragon. For a group working on building trust and teamwork, the focus might be to sneak past the dragon in small groups using their skills. Note that the applied GM might have one idea of what the players will do, such as sneak past the dragon, but the players may do something else, such as bargain with it. Allowing for players to test limits and to make changes to the narrative is part of what can make applied RPGs such a powerful tool for therapy.

It should be noted that the story being adaptable and changeable can make

studying applied RPGs difficult. Since one wants to control as much as possible when doing a study, having a story that can vary greatly depending upon the actions of the players makes for a unique research challenge. This challenge is not insurmountable, but it is an issue to consider if one is wishing to study the applied use of RPGs. Keeping the flexibility of the story might be imperative for the effectiveness of applied RPGs, and—if possible—should be kept in any studies that are conducted on using applied RPGs.

Story can also be used to increase player buy-in for the group. The players can help to create the story that they will be telling during their campaign. Having the group create the story together can be an excellent method of allowing the group to get to know one another, creating a shared sense of purpose. Additionally, as the group decides what they want to see in the story, this process can communicate to the GM what the group is most interested in and likely to engage with. The GM might have a great story about rescuing someone, but the group may show that they are more excited about finding treasure. Knowing what they are interested in helps the GM craft a narrative that the group will find engaging and enjoyable.

MECHANICS

Gaming mechanics are another aspect of using RPGs in therapy that can be a boon for an applied GM. There are many forms of RPGs available, and there are many different types of rule sets that can be used. For example, GMs can find rules that emulate real-world skills, like those found in *Outbreak: Undead* where ability scores are related to the player's real-world abilities. There are also grittier mathematics-based systems, such as *Pathfinder*, which uses many different types of skills and bonuses that players need to keep track of during gameplay. Additionally, the applied GM can add or remove mechanics from a gaming system to help with the therapeutic focus of the group.

If the applied GM wants the players to be more supportive and encouraging of one another, they can build in a system where if the players are supportive of one another, bonuses can be applied to their rolls. Experience points (XP) are points that are awarded to players when a player's character completes certain actions (winning a fight, having a creative idea to disarm a trap, remembering an important historical fact, etc.). These points can then be used to level up the player's character (making the character faster, stronger, sneakier, etc.). XP can

also be awarded when the player engages in desired behaviors, such as helping a fellow member figure out the best spell to use in a fight. Applied GMs can also use in-game rewards to help encourage players to reach their therapeutic goals. For example, if a player can demonstrate proficiency in a desired real-world skill, the GM can give their character a powerful in-game item.

Mechanics bring a sense of predictability and stability to the game. For players who struggle to understand social cues and social norms, such as those on the autism spectrum, having predictable rules that everyone agrees to follow can help reduce their anxiety. In many ways having an explicitly agreed upon rule set gives players a stable base from which they can explore different ideas and concepts.

CONCLUSION

There are many factors to indicate that RPGs could be an effective tool to use in therapy. It is a form of group therapy that utilizes special interests in a way that is fun and intrinsically rewarding for most. Additionally, as RPGs rely on the player using a proxy in the form of their character there is emotional distance between the player and the actions of their character. Using a proxy may encourage them to take more risks or to engage more with role-playing than they might otherwise if they were role-playing as themselves. The mechanics of the game are highly adaptable, lend themselves well to positive reinforcement, and give the game predictability that might reduce anxiety for some players. Overall, there are many reasons why one would want to, at the very least, explore how such a tool could be used and what using it might entail. Before going any further, it is imperative to look at what research has been done and what can be gleaned from that research.

4

Review of Relevant Literature

To help ensure best practices in therapy, one needs to review the relevant literature. Although, as will be discussed below, there are not many studies that examine RPGs, applied or otherwise, directly. However, there are many studies that relate to RPGs. This review of literature seeks to provide foundational research that can be used to inform one's applied use of RPGs.

STATE OF THE RESEARCH

When doing a literature review for RPGs I was surprised at how little the topic has been studied. Indeed, there seem to be more citations on the lack of research around RPGs than there are formalized, controlled studies using RPGs (Ascherman, 1993; Begy, 2015; Daniau, 2016; Idone Cassone, 2017; Jones, 2012; Weninger, 2006). Given that games such as *D&D* have been around since the 1970s, there have been astonishingly few formal studies conducted on the use of RPGs. The largest study on those who play RPGs was published in 1983, and it has yet to be replicated (Fine, 1983).

It seems that the Satanic panic of the 1980s might have had a negative impact on researchers' willingness to use games like *D&D* in academic research. Though video games have been around for about as long as RPGs, they are much more well studied. The discrepancy in research might be a result of video games not undergoing such a cultural clash as RPGs did in the 1980s. This is not to say that video games have not been incorrectly blamed for various cultural phenomena, just that the level of focus does not seem to have ever hit the same level as it did for *D&D* in the 1980s.

There is a notable amount of research around live-action role-playing (LARP)

and specifically around the Nordic LARP community. It is likely that findings from LARP differ slightly from the findings of playing RPGs, though LARP and RPGs generally have more overlap than RPGs and video games. Further, much of what has been written about RPGs and playing RPGs are based on small samples, are case studies, or are mostly theoretical discussions. Though the following review of literature tries to be as extensive as possible, much of what was found is more related to the individuals who play RPGs and the games themselves than directly examining the effects of RPGs.

As noted earlier, through the unique blending of fun, flow, role-play, and structure, RPGs seem uniquely suitable to use as a therapeutic tool. Though there is no formal field of study for using RPGs as an intervention, there are many other alternative forms of therapy that set the precedent for using seemingly nontherapeutic skills and tasks in a therapeutic setting. Consider play therapy, psychodrama, art therapy, dance/movement therapy, recreational therapy, and music therapy. All of these therapies use their modality as a tool to help the client achieve goals that are unrelated to their specific mediums (W. B. Davis et al., 2008; Wood, 2022). For example, in music therapy music is used as a tool to help clients achieve therapy goals. One might successfully complete a music therapy group and learn many new therapy skills while not improving their musical ability at all. Further creative arts therapies have been found to be effective tools for treating a wide variety of diagnoses (Wood, 2022). So, while there is insufficient research on the applied use of RPGs, there is evidence that utilizing various nontherapeutic mediums can be an effective intervention. While such evidence is insufficient to definitively state that the applied use of RPGs is an effective tool, it at least indicates that there is potential for using RPGs in therapy.

As noted above, much of the current research is theoretical, based on case studies, or involved studies without large samples. While all of these are important, the lack of randomized controlled studies is a weakness in the current state of literature on RPGs. Hopefully future studies will address these concerns. As it is the only large-scale study of those who play RPGs, this review shall start with the work of Gary Alan Fine.

FINE'S RESEARCH

In 1983, Gary Alan Fine published his qualitative study on those who played

D&D entitled *Shared Fantasy* (Fine, 1983). In the early 1980s there was a growing fear that playing games such as *D&D* would lead to Satan worship, suicide, demon summoning, the loss of reality testing, and other undesirable outcomes (Peterson, 2012; Ray Allison, 2014; White, 2018). This collection of fears was commonly referred to as the *Satanic panic*. At the time of Fine's publication, the movement was starting to gain momentum with films such as *Mazes and Monsters* (Stern, 1982) feeding into this fear (Peterson, 2012). Fine's work set out to understand who the actual players were, and what, if any, impact playing the game had on its players (Fine, 1983).

In his work Fine found that contrary to the worry that playing a fantasy game would cause a decrease in one's reality testing, good reality testing was imperative to being able to play the game (Fine, 1983). In his observations he noted that players tended to think and play in three distinct frames: the frame of the person, the frame of the gaming system, and the frame of the character.

The frame of the player, frame one, is what would be called the real world (Fine, 1983). It is seeing and understanding the world around yourself. It is knowing who you are, what is happening around you, and so on. Players understand who they are and what physically is happening at the table around them. Humans exist in this frame perpetually, anything else we do is an extension of this frame.

The second frame is that of the gaming system (Fine, 1983). This is the player having a clear understanding of the rules of the game they are playing, so that they can engage in the rules of that setting appropriately. When this frame is not held, it becomes impossible to have a shared gaming experience. Think of trying to play a game with a small child who keeps changing the rules of the game as you play. It can be frustrating and it decreases the chances that you will continue to play. The second frame is one that people engage in anytime we are doing an activity with standard rules, from playing a game, to following work-related procedures. The second frame can be seen as the frame that creates the magic circle.

The third frame is that of the character (Fine, 1983). This frame is the one that most people will have limited, if any, experience in. Holding frame three requires the player to learn how their character sees the world. The player needs to understand that their character has a unique, different view of the world than they do. As such the character might have different motivations than the player in given situations. The player holding frame three is challenged with understanding the difference between what the character would think, feel, and

want in a situation versus what the player thinks, feels, and wants in a situation.

Fine believed that only by engaging in the three frames are players able to have a shared gaming experience (Fine, 1983). Consider the following statement by a player of *D&D*. “Tor’rena goes onto the stage to preform her new song. I rolled an 18 plus my bonus of 7, so 25. Jordan, can you pass the chips?” The above statements demonstrate a player switching seamlessly between the frames of play. The first statement about the character Tor’rena is in the third frame. The second statement about rolling the dice is in the second frame. And the third statement of asking for the chips is in the first frame, that of the player. What Fine (1983) noted was that when players lost concentration or were confused with any of the frames, the game could not occur.

Fine’s work and observations on the three frames of play helped to inform most of the research on RPGs. How his work can be used as part of applied gaming will be discussed further in the chapter on the transtheoretical model. Out of all the theories and work that has been developed since Fine’s study, bleed is perhaps the second most discussed topic.

RESEARCH ON BLEED

Bleed, as stated earlier, occurs when emotions or experiences move between the player and their character in an RPG. As theorized by Bowman and Schrier (2018), bleed-out, or ego-bleed, might account for how players learn skills, both good and bad, through playing RPGs. A 2018 paper by Leonard and Thurman postulated on the neuroscience behind bleed-out for those who engage in LARP. The authors speculated that having in-character positive interactions with another character would create a Pavlovian-like response. They theorized that such a response would trigger the pleasure pathways of the brain upon seeing or being reminded of that character. Though this theory is interesting and has foundational merit, a formalized study has not yet been completed to test their theory.

Understanding how RPGs impact the brain can help one better understand the potential benefits, and risks, of using RPGs in their practice. Balzer (2011) theorized that as the campaign is a shared experience by the players, it is also a shared reality for those players. This is to say that the story, the characters, and the world are an agreed upon illusionary world (Balzer, 2011). Balzer’s theory might help explain how it is that memories of what PCs do in game is discussed

in the first person (e.g., “Do you recall the time we saved that town from the giant?” rather than saying, “Do you recall the game where our characters saved a town from a giant?”). If, from a neurological perspective, the gaming world is perceived as being real this also could help to explain how bleed occurs. It is important to note that Balzer (2011) was not saying that players believe that their gaming world is real. The world of the game is not a shared delusion, it is more that the experience of playing in the world can feel real.

The fact that bleed does seem to occur with regularity in both RPGs and LARP indicates that it can be an expected, and perhaps even desired, outcome of play. As bleed can create powerful emotional experiences, it has been suggested that informed consent around bleed should likely be a part of any RPG or LARP (Bowman, 2013; Leonard & Thurman, 2018). To see bleed in practice, one can look to case studies that have been conducted, which can help convey the potential power of using RPGs for therapy.

CASE STUDIES

A 2020 qualitative study by Orr et al. interviewed six players to discern and examine the social benefits of playing RPGs. Through these interviews, Orr et al. (2020) found that players were attracted to games that had themes they enjoyed, supporting the evidence from Kelly (2015) that using special interests increases engagement. Further, through playing the participants noted that conflicts arose both in and out of character. The participants noted that the games helped them learn how to employ conflict resolution skills to think through their problems (Orr et al., 2020). In their conclusion the authors noted that all six of their respondents believed that playing RPGs had a positive impact on their social functioning (Orr et al., 2020). While such a small sample size cannot be translated to a much larger population, it does provide evidence that further examination of these claims is warranted.

A 2018 case study by Weiner analyzed the use of RPGs in the classroom. The study’s findings indicated that using RPGs in the classroom increases student engagement (Weiner, 2018). When student engagement is increased, it is likely that more meaningful and impactful learning can occur. A limitation noted by Weiner (2018) is that learning how to be a GM can be a time-consuming endeavor, and asking teachers to learn to be GMs might not be feasible.

A 1994 case study by Blackmon examined how playing an RPG impacted

one of his clients. Blackmon noted that playing *D&D* helped his client find a community. Further, it seemed that through playing *D&D* the client became more introspective, and as a result was more open in individual therapy (Blackmon, 1994). The client in the case study was reported to have anger management problems, and *D&D* provided a safe place for them to vent their anger and rage without actually hurting anyone or breaking any laws (Blackmon, 1994). Blackmon (1994) noted in the study that fantasy stories help children learn how to process emotions; with an RPG the lesson might be intensified as one is essentially playing in the story. From this case study, Blackmon (1994) made the argument that it might be beneficial to play RPGs in therapy.

A study from 1980 by Johnson and Quinlan looked at role-playing and schizophrenia. Johnson and Quinlan (1980) wished to determine whether those diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia could engage in role-playing. The study found that for some diagnosed with schizophrenia role-playing could be an effective tool. The determining factor on whether or not role-playing could be utilized was the individual's ability to hold a frame of reference for the role-play versus reality (Johnson & Quinlan, 1980). If the person had difficulty with keeping the frame of the person versus the frame of the character, they would struggle with role-playing. Though their study did not indicate if role-playing would be helpful for those with schizophrenia, it did note that it could be a tool to use (Johnson & Quinlan, 1980). Additionally, their data did not indicate that role-playing would be contraindicated (Johnson & Quinlan, 1980).

A 1986 study examined the use of *D&D* as an intervention for at-risk boys (Zayas & Lewis). The authors found that playing *D&D* helped the players understand the importance of having a diverse group to help solve problems (Zayas & Lewis, 1986). The players also had experiences where the actions of one character ruined in-game opportunities for all of the players, and the authors noted that this seemed to help the players better understand the impact of their actions on others (Zayas & Lewis, 1986). Though the study did not refer to these learned lessons as bleed (likely because the term was not used at the time) that appears to be what occurred. The players learned skills that they applied to their day-to-day lives through the actions of their characters. The authors noted that in the hands of a well-trained GM, RPGs have the potential to be a powerful teaching tool in part because they allow players to take risks without real-world consequences (Zayas & Lewis, 1986).

Not all of the studies have shown RPGs in a favorable light. A 1993 case study by Ascherman demonstrated that an applied GM needs to both understand

the game and know how to manage the narrative if they wish to use RPGs for applied use. In Ascherman's article he discussed that when he took over an inpatient adolescent treatment unit, two of the patients, both recorded to have narcissistic tendencies, were running games of *D&D* for the other patients on the unit. Ascherman noted that their behavior was dominating and demeaning toward some of their players. He was also concerned by the modeling of the inpatient floor into a dungeon filled with monsters for the players to combat. The patients started referring to their floor as a dungeon and to the staff as monsters. Ascherman noted that he was disturbed when he was hearing the combat encounters from the game. He banned *D&D* and noted that things improved when the game stopped. Though Ascherman was arguably uninformed about *D&D*, his observation—that the GM holds the power and control over the game—was important. When the activity was being run by the patients without clinical oversight it became abusive (Ascherman, 1993). This case study is a reminder that any tool that can be used to address clinical needs can be harmful if used inappropriately.

Informal case studies have been published in popular media discussing the impact of playing RPGs. In a 2014 news article a parent explained how playing *D&D* impacted their son who was diagnosed with autism (Bartlette, 2014). The parent discussed how having the flexibility of no real-world consequences encouraged their son to try new things. The parent also said that being in the game helped their son socialize, as everyone in the group had similar goals (Bartlette, 2014).

A 2017 article from Kotaku relayed how therapists are using RPGs as tools to assist their clients. When interviewed, parents of children in the groups expressed how much it meant for their children to feel wanted and valued as members of their adventuring party (D'Anastasio, 2017). Providers then discussed how bleed can occur in their games and be used as a tool to help clients process what is happening in their real lives in a safe setting (D'Anastasio, 2017).

A Forbes article in 2020 further discussed how playing games, such as *D&D*, can help children open up and connect with one another. The writer, Clary Estes, noted that therapists used *D&D* to help teach social skills to children. Estes also discussed how, with no adjustments, the game already included role-playing, character development, and conflict resolution, all of which are important social skills for children to learn. Estes interviewed workers from the Bodhana Group who explained that some of the key aspects of applied gaming are the use of an

avatar, having a safe space in which to act and then face consequences, and getting to tell a full story with a character (Estes, 2020). One parent who was interviewed said that their child, after being a participant in applied gaming group, was more aware of how their actions impacted others, and was now better able to focus on goals aside from winning (Estes, 2020). A 2021 article from *The Guardian* communicated how during the pandemic playing RPGs online became an important way for people to connect (Hazel, 2021). Players quoted in the article stated how playing helped them recognize the need for a group of people with diverse skills, and also how they could build a community through play (Hazel, 2021).

Though case studies by their nature are generally designed around a very small sample size, they are helpful for providing a proof of concept. The above case studies discussed how RPGs seem to improve social and conflict resolution skills (Blackmon, 1994; Orr et al., 2020; Zayas & Lewis, 1986). RPGs also seem to aid students with learning (Weiner, 2018). Additionally, it appears that RPGs can be used with a wide range of diagnoses, including schizophrenia, and could be effective tools in the hands of a trained professional (Blackmon, 1994; Johnson & Quinlan, 1980; Weiner, 2018; Zayas & Lewis, 1986). Formalized large-scale studies need to be done to further the case study findings.

LEARNING THROUGH PLAY

As noted above RPGs seem to be a beneficial tool for learning (Weiner, 2018). As the applied use of RPGs is focused on teaching skills that are unrelated to the game, determining whether gaming, and specifically RPGs, are effective tools for acquiring new skills is important. As there are no formalized studies on the use of RPGs as teaching tools, this section will look more broadly at learning through playing games.

An article by Ferrara (2013) examined how games can be used as teaching tools. In this article Ferrara (2013) noted that the idea of gamification, the adding of game elements into something that is not a game, is not always advisable. Nor is it the best way to harness the power of gaming for nongaming activities (Ferrara, 2013). The author stated that the problem often comes about because game designers think about what they want the outcome of the game to be, rather than considering the experience of the gamer. Ferrara (2013) notes that games should be first built from the experience of the player. To build a

successful gaming experience that also teaches a lesson, developers should follow four steps (Ferrara, 2013). First, the developers need to find and define a core message. Second, that message needs to be tied to a strategy. Third, there needs to be a way for the players to engage in self-directed discovery. Fourth, the choices in the game need to be meaningful (Ferrara, 2013). When these four elements come together games can be fun, engaging, rewarding, and teach real-world lessons. Applied GMs can take an already existing game system and bring in these four elements to develop their own applied groups.

In a 2008 article, Karwowski and Soszynski investigated how creative imagination can be developed. The authors in this study did talk about RPGs, though they did not mention any specific games (Karwowski & Soszynski, 2008). Their study demonstrated that playing RPGs seemed to increase creativity (Karwowski & Soszynski, 2008). Creative thinking is a desired skill set in both academic and therapeutic settings, indicating that RPGs could be an effective tool for teaching this skill.

A 2016 article by Blackstock examined the process of character creation in RPGs. Blackstock reviewed literature on role-playing and recorded findings that indicated that role-playing seemed to help players build a deeper understanding of the self. These findings also indicated that because playing RPGs lowered players' inhibitions, the players were then more likely to have new corrective experiences. It might be that role-playing can help teach needed skills for different situations. Indeed, military training often relies on soldiers role-playing situations, such as search and rescue, accidents, and other incidents that they might encounter. According to Blackstock (2016), respondents mentioned that the more they played a character the more that character felt like an extension of them as a person. Role-playing also allowed for players to engage in behaviors where they felt free or liberated from anxiety. Moreover, Blackstock noted that lessons learned by the player in character were directly transferred to life outside of the game. In other words, bleed-out occurred. Such research gives credit to using the role-playing aspect of RPGs as a therapeutic intervention.

A 2016 study by Hellström examined the impact of bringing games into postsecondary classrooms. Though Hellström (2016) noted that around 80% of students were enthusiastic about the gaming aspect of the class, the students did not feel it was an effective teaching tool. Hellström (2016) concluded that bringing games into the secondary classroom could be effective, but that it needed to be done with care to ensure that students recognized they were learning.

Games as teaching aids seem to be an area of great interest for researchers. A 2017 study by Rhodes et al. explored whether playing video games could help with decision-making skills. In this study learning via video games was compared to watching films on the same issues. Findings indicated that video games were a more effective teaching tool for concepts that were difficult to learn passively (Rhodes et al., 2017). Again, it is likely that with the flexibility of RPGs, learning active skills would be even more potent in a setting without predetermined solutions.

In an article by Crow and Nelson (2015) the use of academic role-playing was examined. The authors explained that through role-playing participants explored their feelings on a subject, gained insights into their attitudes, values, and perceptions of that topic; helped develop problem-solving skills; and discovered subjects in different ways (Joyve & Will, 1980, as cited in Crow & Nelson, 2015). One of the reasons why role-playing seems so effective is because it requires learners to take an active, rather than passive, role. Being active allows for participants to construct their own understanding of material, as opposed to having it told to them. Such active learning also draws upon the experiences and knowledge that the participant had before the start of the lesson (increasing the chances that the participant will enter into a flow state), allows for learning to happen with social interactions, and helps the participant find meaning behind the task (Kauchak & Eggen, 2007, as cited in Crow & Nelson, 2015). The findings of this study again showed that role-playing in an academic setting could be an effective tool for teaching; however, it was noted that doing so would require more work from teachers than they may be willing to do (Crow & Nelson, 2015).

Meriläinen (2012) examined the impact of playing RPGs on the development of the player. Meriläinen expressed that since RPGs allowed players to experiment with different ways of being, they are probably powerful tools for social learning. Through their survey data they found that situations in the game were not as important as how much the players thought about those situations outside of the game (Meriläinen, 2012). Respondents also believed that playing RPGs improved their imagination skills (Meriläinen, 2012). One negative outcome was that players stated that the amount of time it took to play was a drawback. Overall RPGs seem to be an effective tool for building empathy. In the survey, Meriläinen also found that those who played RPGs had a positive image of themselves in regards to their imagination, creative problem-solving, and empathy (2012). One interesting finding was that the women who responded

to the survey indicated that they were more inclined to reflect on the game and their emotions from the game between gaming sessions (Meriläinen, 2012).

Bowman and Lieberoth (2018) discussed the psychological foundations for playing, and possibly using, RPGs in therapy. The work examined the findings of Michael Kallam's 1984 thesis, which examined the impact of playing an RPG on creative problem-solving. In the study it was found that a small group of children with intellectual disabilities developed more creative and complex solutions to problems over the course of an ongoing role-playing campaign (Kallam, 1984, as cited in Bowman & Lieberoth, 2018). Bowman and Lieberoth discussed that when players are immersed in the role-playing activity it is probable that deeper, more meaningful learning is occurring, though specific research on this topic has not yet been completed (2018). There is also speculation that activation of mirror neurons through watching others in role-play, such as watching a game at a game store or livestreamed on the internet, might aid in psychological growth and development (Bowman & Lieberoth, 2018).

Bowman and Lieberoth comment that most RPG research is now about video games, and there do appear to be differences in the psychological functioning of playing RPGs in a tabletop format as opposed to a video game format. In a video game the magic circle is contained within the code of the game; for an RPG the magic circle is contained as a shared understanding among the players of the game. For this space to be held those participating in the game need to all be active contributors to the game's narrative (Bowman & Lieberoth, 2018).

Part of the immersion into the gaming space involves the player and character having goals that motivate them to play (Bowman & Lieberoth, 2018). Of note, the motivation does not need to be that of the player. Rather it can be the player's character whose motivation serves as the driving force within the gaming world, and the motivation of the character can be enough to draw the player into the game. Bowman and Lieberoth (2018) note that role-playing and immersion can become problematic when they negatively impact players in their ability to engage in day-to-day functioning. Bowman and Lieberoth (2018) also discuss how many who become absorbed in RPGs are engaging in a type of wish fulfillment; notably, they indicated that it is mostly male power fantasies that are depicted in RPGs (both tabletop and video game).

A chapter by Hammer et al. (2018) discusses the relationship between RPGs and learning. There is no doubt that games can be used for learning, and often are used, in educational settings. The authors note four approaches for

educational learning through games: a behavioral approach, a cognitive approach, a constructionist approach, and a sociocultural approach. *Behavioral approaches* to learning involve repetition as the primary mechanism of learning. *Cognitive approaches* allow for learners to have their mental models challenged and shaped through experiences. *Constructionist approaches* focus on a hands-on method to learning. *Sociocultural approaches* focus on collaboration, the community, and having conversations (Hammer et al., 2018).

A benefit of using games for teaching is that they allow for *psychosocial moratorium*, a situation in which real-world consequences are significantly lowered (Hammer et al., 2018). This is similar to what occurs in RPGs where a character acts as the avatar/stand-in for the player, which allows for a significant level of psychosocial moratorium in play. It is this aspect that might explain why applied RPGs can be such an effective tool for psychological learning and growth. One issue with using games as a method of learning is that if playing a game is mandatory, it can decrease both the player's enjoyment and intrinsic motivation (Hammer et al., 2018). As is the case with much of the literature around RPGs, the bulk of the research is focused on video games, with the second largest group being LARP events.

What is known from the of use of LARP in education is that one of the key factors seems to be authenticity in the gaming world as opposed to how realistic the gaming world is (Hammer et al., 2018). Thus, keeping the game consistent and engaging is more important than realism—which has important implications for the applied use of RPGs. Applied GMs need not worry so much about how realistic their game is. As long as it is engaging and fun, the players are likely going to participate and get something out of the experience. For learning, LARP and RPGs offer the participant the opportunity to engage in a high-pressure situation with no real-world consequences (Hammer et al., 2018). This also seems to be one of the keys as to why RPGs can be helpful for psychological learning.

A 2016 article by MacLean examined the process of making educational improvisational games. As MacLean (2016) put it, it is crucial that improvisational games are focused on specific topics and that there is a director to steer the game. In applied RPGs the role of the director falls to the applied GM. Part of what they do is to direct and guide the players toward desired topics and materials.

FINDINGS FROM LARP

Several of the articles already mentioned in this review are focused on LARP. Those mentioned have been placed in the earlier sections because they fit more within the themes of those sections rather than being a standalone example of LARP. It is important to note that most of Bowman's work is focused on LARP and LARP players rather than on RPGs. The following information expands the review of LARP and shows how LARP may be helpful for RPG use.

In a 2020 study by Homann and White, the impact of LARPing as a professional in a desired profession was studied. Homann and White wanted to see if playing a desirable role helped the person be that role outside of the role-play. What they discovered was that playing a role helped participants feel more confident about being in that position, and that it could inspire them to seek out training for that role (Homann & White, 2020). Interestingly they also found that role-playing a position that one already has (e.g., a teacher role-playing as a teacher) did not have any impact on functioning. Their study again shows the power for people of acting as though we are something or someone we want to be can facilitate bleed into our day-to-day existence.

A 2016 study by de los Angeles reviewed how people can learn through role-playing. Specifically, de los Angeles wanted to review whether engaging in LARP was a more effective teaching tool than other forms of outside education. He concluded that LARP appeared to have advantages over traditional outdoor classroom activities (de los Angeles, 2016).

A 2015 article discussed the duality of playing LARP, how the player might have one set of motivations while the character has another; it is the job of the GM and the player to bring these two desires together in a meaningful way (Montola et al., 2015). Such arguments demonstrate the necessity of the GM to be aware of the different motivations that can exist within the game.

ALIBIS IN PLAY

One of the most contributive tools in both RPGs and LARP is that the player is not acting as themselves, they are using a character within the game. Several papers and other works have theorized that the use of an alibi or a character may be part of what allows players to take risks, to learn, and to grow through playing. The following are some of the supporting works on the use of character

in both RPGs and LARP.

Role-play has been a part of training for those in the mental health fields for quite some time (Shepard, 2002). Typically, in graduate programs, students engage in role-plays as clients and therapists to learn and practice therapy techniques (Shepard, 2002). One of the challenges is that in doing such role-plays there might be ethical dilemmas as students may discuss some of their own issues and divulge more than is desirable to their class (Shepard, 2002). In a trial program, Shepard used screenwriting techniques to help his students create a character to role-play in the class. This trial was highly successful in helping the students actively learn from role-play, allowing them to both gain insight into how to behave as a therapist and to observe what the client experience is like, while also not getting into personal issues (Shepard, 2002). Such findings demonstrate that the use of a character can be an effective method of learning.

A study by Rosselet and Stauffer (2013) examined the use of role-playing with gifted students. Rosselet and Stauffer (2013) wrote that RPGs can offer teens an opportunity to address issues related to self-concept, to develop their identity, and to aid them with improving awareness of social rules. Having trained play therapists run RPGs for gifted children can help them develop their social and emotional functioning (Rosselet & Stauffer, 2013). One of the great benefits of RPGs is that it allows for players to try new behaviors while saving face by providing an alibi/stand-in in the form of their character (Rosselet & Stauffer, 2013). RPGs also offer players the opportunity to immerse in practice without being viewed as immature (Rosselet & Stauffer, 2013). Additionally, the use of fantasy elements in the role-play creates separation between real-world challenges, so players are better able to practice new skills (Rosselet & Stauffer, 2013). As RPGs are a blend of fun, leisure, and role-play, they can help create distance from one’s ego while also creating an immersive arena where players can practice of sought-after skills and abilities (Rosselet & Stauffer, 2013). RPGs offer players the opportunity to experiment with various behaviors and emotional states (Rosselet & Stauffer, 2013). Another benefit is that the players have the agency to decide how much or how little they wish to involve themselves in the role-playing (Rosselet & Stauffer, 2013).

RPGs seem an effective way to encourage children and adolescents to engage in a treatment setting (Rosselet & Stauffer, 2013). They seem to provide multiple ways for players to partake in identity exploration, to practice various types of emotional expression, and to explore different forms of identity expression in a safe setting (Rosselet & Stauffer, 2013). RPGs also provide a safe space where

players can express pent-up emotions in a way that is safe for both themselves and others (Rosselet & Stauffer, 2013). Role-playing also allows players to consider different aspects of the self (Rosselet & Stauffer, 2013). Finally, playing RPGs gives players the opportunity to develop interpersonal skills (Rosselet & Stauffer, 2013). In their study Rosselet and Stauffer (2013) found that some of their players learned how to interact more appropriately with their peers and teachers.

OTHER RELEVANT TOPICS AND STUDIES

In a 2011 study, Arjoranta sought to understand RPGs in terms of being a language-based game. In this study, Arjoranta discussed the importance of the players being able to interact with, and change, the world of the game. Arjoranta postulated that if a game (such as a video game) does not allow for agency of the player, it is not fully a role-playing game (Arjoranta, 2011).

A 2013 qualitative study by Thorhauge examined how the rules systems of tabletop versus video game RPGs impacted the play and meaning of the game for participants. What they found in their analysis was that while tabletop games allowed for more flexibility in the rules, even in video RPGs the way the players interacted with the rules impacted the meaning they derived from play (Thorhauge, 2013). As video games have risen in popularity there have been many attempts to bring tabletop games into digital spaces. Many popular board games have digital versions such as *Pandemic*, *Wingspan*, and *Spirit Island*. Other virtual tabletop systems are available to help simulate being at a physical gaming table, such as Vorpal Board, a web-based application that utilizes webcams to permit players to see and digitally interact with someone's physical game board in another location, and Tabletop Simulator, a fully virtual and programmable table for players to access through digital gaming rooms to play digital versions of board games. Yet the question arises: How helpful is it to have digital versions of board games?

In a study by Cheung et al. (2013) the impact of using digital automation with tabletop games was examined. Though the authors noted that automation did help with running the game, there were some notable limitations. These included the loss of the ability to add house rules, the incapability to allow do-overs caused by errors during a turn, and the lack of flexibility in scaffolding rules to keep the game simple for new players (Cheung et al., 2013). The authors noted

that while automation is available, at the end of the day it is no substitute for being around the table with friends. Since the publication of the article, there have been advancements in virtual tabletops that might enhance the workability and functionality of playing tabletop games digitally. However, as of the writing of this book, there are no known studies that have examined the impact of playing over a platform, such as Tabletop Simulator or Vorpal Board, compared to the experience of playing face-to-face.

CONCLUSION

Though there is limited research on the applied use of RPGs or LARP, there are several case studies and related works that indicate both might be viable options for therapy. Play and role-play seem to be effective tools for learning. Thus, while the current research is not sufficient to call the applied use of RPGs evidence based, there is enough to suggest that they have the potential to become an evidence-based practice.

5

Transtheoretical Model

THE NEED FOR A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A theoretical framework helps providers conceptualize and communicate the work that they do with clients. It gives the provider a structure to comprehend how their interventions fit within a given modality as well as a basic understanding of the mechanism of change. Additionally, it gives providers a common language in which to discuss how their interventions work. The transtheoretical model that is presented here is specifically designed to address how RPGs are played and to explore the mechanisms of change that occur within the game setting. It is also adaptable to the theoretical orientation of the applied GM. Beyond providing a common language to be used between therapists, this model can be utilized for research. The transtheoretical model was created utilizing the foundational work of Gary Alan Fine (1983), the more recent work on bleed by Sarah Lynn Bowman (2010), and was blended together by Boccamazzo and Connell in 2019, and presented in 2020.

FRAME THEORY

A theoretical frame gives providers a way to understand behaviors or mindsets within themselves or their clients. Frames allow for individuals to see one situation from several different perspectives. As there is much that occurs behaviorally and in the mindset of those who play RPGs, the frames provide a useful tool for understanding both what is occurring and how it impacts the game and the players.

FINE'S WORK

As discussed in the review of literature, Gary Alan Fine's work is the largest study of those who play RPGs. Through his work he noted the three frames of play: the first frame is the frame of the player, the second is the frame of the game, and the third is the frame of the character (Fine, 1983). Fine noted that if players could not hold the three frames, a game could not occur.

A rather humorous example of frame confusion is the story of the dread gazebo. In this encounter a GM was describing the scene to the players (Aronson, n.d.). They mentioned that there was a gazebo in the area the characters were in. Thus, the GM was speaking to the players in frame one to provide information about what the characters in frame three were experiencing. One of the players asked for clarification on what the gazebo was doing (frames two and three). The GM noted that the gazebo was doing nothing as it was a gazebo (Aronson, n.d.). Now the player started to escalate the situation by having their character draw their weapon and firing an arrow into the gazebo (frames two and three). The player continued to intensify the situation until the GM decided to lean into what the player was doing by turning the gazebo into a monster (Aronson, n.d.). What was occurring at this table was confusion between frame one, the player, and frame three, the character.

The player did not know what a gazebo was, so they had no mental image for it. Their character could see that it was an open sided pavilion in a garden; however, the player started having the character act in ways that did not make sense for frame three as there was confusion as to what a gazebo is. While the full interaction is quite humorous, it shows how a misunderstanding between the frames can cause the structure of the game to momentarily fall apart.

RPGs do not function when players see the actions of other characters or NPCs as being personal attacks (Bowman, 2013). Consider the following RPG with two players: a fighter and a wizard. The party is visiting the fighter's hometown and the wizard is flirting with an NPC who is the fighter's sibling. The fighter might be annoyed by this and act out toward the wizard. Such an interaction holds no problem. However, if the fighter's player sees the actions of the wizard as a deliberate attack by the wizard's player against them as a player, and the fighter's player gets angry at the wizard's player, then frame confusion has occurred (frames two and three). Something important to note here is that holding the frames can mean that a character can be angry with another character, yet the players behind the characters have no ill will toward each

other.

An example of frames being held well occurred in a group where there was a cleric and a rogue. The rogue kept acting impulsively and getting the group into difficult situations. The cleric was frustrated by what was happening. The player who controlled the cleric was laughing and was talking out of character to the player of the rogue and noting how her character was frustrated. Things between the characters escalated to the point that the player of the cleric told the player of the rogue, “My character wants to hit your character.” The player who controlled the rogue said, “I can understand why. I won’t be mad if that is what your character decides to do, it might help my character start to understand the consequences of their actions better.” Notice how well both players were holding the frames of play. Neither player was angered, they were amused, they understood the rule system that governed their actions, and the cleric’s player was simply role-playing her character as being angry. Through communication between frames one and three, the players and the characters were able to successfully navigate the situation.

Fine’s work provides a basic understanding for how to view the function of the game and how to communicate challenges that can be seen in play. Games played using the concept of the three frames can help players build, grow, and further develop their skills. Even in his research, Fine noted several players whom he observed building skills, such as social skills, through playing (Fine, 1983). When discussing how to enhance games so that one can apply therapeutic interventions, a fourth frame is needed.

THE FOURTH FRAME

Boccamazzo and Connell (2020) developed a fourth frame to address psychological interventions in RPGs. The fourth frame is the frame of psychological theory. It is through the fourth frame that one understands the interventions and is able to interweave skill building in the player (frame one) through the gaming system (frame two) using the character as a persona (frame three) to practice those skills. The GM leading applied RPGs requires an understanding of these different frames and a knowledge of how to utilize their clients/players switching between the different frames to build both theory of mind and perspective taking.

In the fourth frame, the applied GM brings into the game the psychological

and/or behavioral interventions that they want players to learn. The applied GM looks for opportunities within the role-play or story to weave in therapeutic lessons, goals, objectives, and other therapeutic skills. The fourth frame allows for additional framework, that of psychological theory, to be blended into the tabletop game.

BRINGING IN INTERVENTIONS

As discussed earlier, RPGs are highly adaptable to a wide variety of settings. As such they can be easily adapted to integrate therapeutic techniques, and allow for opportunities to practice such opportunities. It is up to the applied GM to determine which interventions they want to bring into their applied RPG groups. The transtheoretical model is so named because interventions from any therapeutic orientation can be woven into applied RPGs (Boccamazzo & Connell, 2020).

If the applied GM uses acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT), the provider can teach diffusion techniques and the concept of the self-as-context through how the players role-play and how the players and characters can have different desires and goals in a given situation. If the applied GM uses cognitive behavior therapy (CBT), they can create situations for the player to role-play through distorted thinking.

Weaving therapeutic interventions into an RPG takes practice. It is often advisable to start with asking what skill the applied GM wants their players to learn or practice during a given session. Then they should consider how best to present the skill to their players. Do they wish to teach the skill before starting the group, or to teach and discuss the skill as it becomes relevant during the story? Once these questions have been answered, the applied GM will know how best to bring frame four into their session. Building therapeutic encounters will be discussed in the second part of this book.

As the facilitator of applied RPG groups, one must recognize when participants move between and through the other frames, all while attending to the goals for each player, telling the story of the game, and running the mechanics. As noted in earlier chapters, the applied use of RPGs has much in common with various recreational therapies in that the facilitator is using a tool not designed for therapy to help achieve therapeutic goals. To gain this ability, three specific skill sets are needed: knowledge of behavioral health

interventions, a willingness to play, and familiarity of the gaming system being utilized (Boccamazzo & Connell, 2020).

NEEDED SKILLS FOR APPLIED GMs

Clinical Training

Many RPG players are likely to share stories about how the game has helped them grow and develop and how therapeutic playing such games can be. It is important to take a moment to note that while something can be therapeutic, that does not mean that it is therapy. When players are discussing how playing a game was therapeutic to them, they are often describing something that can be conceptualized as a side effect of playing. When using applied RPGs, the GM is intentionally utilizing the game and the gaming mechanics to help the players move toward therapeutic goals (Boccamazzo & Connell, 2020).

To use any tool in a therapeutic way requires specific training in therapeutic practices (American Counseling Organization, 2014; American Psychological Association, 2022; National Association of Social Workers, 2017). Such instruction is typically found in postgraduate training, such as at the masters or doctoral level, or through continuing education trainings. Providers must understand the importance and use of informed consent, behavioral interventions, goal setting, data collection, and documentation on progress toward goals. All of these are discussed further in the chapter on ethics.

> As noted in the discussion of RPG terms, some providers choose to have professional GMs run their groups and serve as the applied GMs for those RPGs while the provider acts in a supervisory role. Much in the same way that one can have unlicensed technicians run educational groups, groups that are focused on skill building can be run by a technician. If a provider does use a technician to serve as the applied GM, it is the provider's job to ensure that their applied GM is adequately trained and adheres to ethical and legal guidelines.

Knowledge of the Game

When running applied RPGs, the game itself becomes a tool for the therapist to utilize (Boccamazzo & Connell, 2020). Any tool that is used as part of therapy needs to be familiar to the therapist employing it. In the same way that a music therapist uses music as a catalyst for behavioral goals, the focus needs to be on

the behavioral goals, not on the running of the game (W. B. Davis et al., 2008).

This is not to say that the GM needs to know every rule by heart or be the foremost expert in the gaming system. It is required that they have sufficient familiarity with the gaming system so they can run it without much conscious thought. As noted by Bergström (2012) balancing when to follow and when to break the rules of an RPG is similar to how a skilled jazz musician will balance following and breaking the rules of music while playing a solo. For some GMs running the game can take the form of improvisation, while for others this can mean having each and every rule memorized (Bergström, 2012).

Ultimately, when running therapeutic games one does not want to have the game get in the way of therapy (Boccamazzo & Connell, 2020). If a GM is looking up a rule or worrying about how to run an encounter, they are likely missing significant behavioral information occurring around the table. Again, the game is a tool, not the primary focus, for the therapeutic GM.

Willingness to Play

Playing, especially for older players, is often seen as taking a risk. Indeed, adults often require an alibi to give themselves "permission" to play a game (Atanasio, 2020; Deterding, 2018; Rogerson & Gibbs, 2018; Stenros & Bowman, 2018). If the GM is willing to take a risk and engage in role-playing, by extension, it gives the players permission to do so as well (Boccamazzo & Connell, 2020). When asking a professional to play, there is more of a perceived social risk than for nonprofessionals.

This risk comes from the American culture, which teaches that play is a thing for children and the uneducated (Deterding, 2018). The American culture teaches that those with degrees, especially doctoral level degrees, should take themselves and their work seriously and thus not play (Deterding, 2018). The above assertion that doctors do not play is of course ridiculous. Professional and highly educated people play just as much as others do. There is still the expectation that professionals do not play; if the professional in the room is unwilling to play, it communicates to the players that play is an undesirable behavior.

When psychologists, social workers, counselors, and therapists demonstrate a willingness to play, it shows that play is safe. It lays bare that even professional adults can engage in play and that play is a desirable and expected part of the group (Boccamazzo & Connell, 2020). In short by the applied GM playing, it

gives permission for the others around the table to do so as well.

If there is a willingness to play and knowledge of the rules, the individual is a highly skilled GM. If there is a readiness to play and expertise in clinical training, the person is a play therapist. If there is knowledge of the rules and clinical training, the person is a great observer and theorist (Boccamazzo & Connell, 2020). By bringing all three skills together, a provider can become a highly effective therapeutic GM (Boccamazzo & Connell, 2020). Before discussing further how I will bring the four frames and the three skill sets together, it is necessary to discuss one other factor that occurs in RPGs, bleed.

BLEED

As noted in the Foundations chapter *bleed* is the term used to describe how feelings and skills can move between the player and their character (Bowman, 2010; Bowman, 2013; Bowman & Lieberoth 2018; Leonard & Thurman, 2018). *Bleed-in* is the term to describe when skills or emotions go from the player to the character. *Bleed-out*, on the other hand, occurs when skills or emotions go from the character to the player (Bowman, 2010; Bowman, 2013; Bowman & Lieberoth 2018; Leonard & Thurman, 2018).

Sometimes applied GMs ask their players to create a character that is either wholly or partially aspirational for the player. Aspirational characters tend to embody traits that the player wishes to have in their life. Through role-playing they are presented with an opportunity to be the person that they wish they could be in a safe setting with no real-world consequences (Blackstock, 2016; Bowman, 2010; Daniau, 2016). In this way, a player can see what it is like to say no or to work on being charming. The emotional growth that the player experiences from role-playing as their character is the basis for bleed-out. The behavior goes out from the character into the player.

As skills and traits can move from the player to the character, it is important to take a moment to note the difference between meta-gaming and bleed. *Meta-gaming* is the term used to describe instances when the player has their character act upon knowledge the character would not have. A few common examples include the player knowing the weakness of a monster the party is fighting, or the player reading ahead in the module so the player knows what is coming despite their character not having access to this information. Another example would be when a player saw that there was a trap but their character was not in

line of sight of the trap, nor had the character been warned of the trap. If the player has their character avoid the trap, that player is engaging in meta-gaming.

Bleed speaks to emotions and skills. Feeling sad when an NPC that your character cared deeply about is killed is a form of bleed-out. A character punching a random NPC because the player had a bad day is a form of bleed-in. Avoiding using one's most powerful spell that uses fire on an enemy because the player knows, but their character does not, that the enemy is resistant to fire is a form of meta-gaming. The differences can be slight but they are important to note. In many ways, bleed is the primary mechanism of change in the applied use of RPG.

> Though the term *bleed* is widely used when discussing the applied use of RPGs, it is not a great term clinically. Writing that "bleed occurred" in a note, for example, may be read as something alarming rather than something desirable. The term *emotional permeability* is proposed instead as it alludes to the movement of emotions from both the player to the character and from the character to the player. Writing, "The client had an experience of emotional permeability in which they had a strong emotional reaction to a situation that occurred to their proxy in a role-play situation" is likely to be more well received by providers who are unfamiliar with applied gaming. When writing on research and conceptualization, the term *bleed* will still be used. When providing examples of documentation, the term *emotional permeability* will be used going forward.

GAMING EXAMPLE OF BLEED

The following is an example using the characters that were introduced earlier in this volume.

Bleed-Out

In one session Maura's character, Keira, was engaged in combat with a powerful monster. Though Keira had hit it several times, it was still standing. This was the first truly challenging fight the players had experienced. Maura started showing worry and anxiety. The game was paused and Maura was asked what she believed Keira's experience of the fight would be so far. Maura said that this was likely the first time in a very long time Keira faced something that was a big challenge and she was scared that it was still standing. Maura was able to note that she also felt a bit worried that her character was in trouble. Olivia reminded Maura that Dina would not let Keira fall as long as she was standing, and she

showed Maura what spells she had ready to support Keira. The other players also discussed their plans for how to assist Keira to Maura. Having this knowledge helped Maura not let her anxiety and worry about what Keira was experiencing impact her as much.

Bleed-In

Cara had a very bad day. She learned that she did not do as well on her midterm as she had hoped. Her best friend was out sick so she had to eat lunch at school alone. To top it all off, her parents were frustrated because she had not done her daily chores before they left for group. The game session started right after Half Pint had won a battle. Urza is usually cheerful and talks about what songs or stories she will tell after such events. Tonight though, Cara had Urza act violently and she was rude to the other characters. The group paused and learned about Cara's bad day. They offered support and Cara was able to calm down, though noted she had hoped the group would have another combat encounter to give her a place to vent her frustrations. The applied GM smiled and said, "Well, it just so happens that on the way back to town you are ambushed by the midterm mimic! Roll initiative!"

THE POWER OF ROLE-PLAYING

Role-playing has a rich history in therapy. Indeed, many skill groups for those on the autism spectrum utilize role-playing to help participants learn specific skills (Attwood, 2015). The primary difference between role-playing in a skills group and role-playing in an RPG is that in a skills group one is often role-playing as themselves in an imagined situation. When playing yourself in a role-play there is perceived social pressure to "be cool" or to get the skill right so the exercise can be over (Crow & Nelson, 2015).

In an RPG the participant is role-playing as their character. They are not the one trying to be charming and engaging, it is their bard that is doing so. The player is not yelling at the NPC for being ostentatious, it is their character who is yelling. Yet, quickly those skills practiced in character can translate to skills that are used outside of the gaming table.

For example, a player in a group had the personal goal of learning how to stand up for themselves. They had created a caring but firm druid. In the weeks

spent playing as their character, the player got to practice speaking their mind and saying no when the character did not want to do something. The player later reported that between sessions their friends had asked them to give them a ride, and the player did not want to do this, yet they usually did what their friends wanted. This player started thinking about what their character would do in their place and realized their character would say no, which helped galvanize the player to say no as well.

Now in this example are both the frames as defined by Fine (1983) and Boccamazzo and Connell (2020) as well as bleed from Bowman (2010). The player was aware of who they were, the world around them, and their own limitations, this was frame one. They were also aware of their character, how their character acted, and how they were different from their character, this was frame three. The player also knew they had been learning how to stand up for themselves, frame four, and had practiced saying no in character, bleed-out. All of these pieces came together to help the player make significant progress on their player goal of standing up for themselves by saying no.

CONCLUSION

To the untrained individual, watching people play an applied RPG might not look any different from an RPG played for fun. Yet as I noted above, playing an RPG is a highly involved process that is cognitively demanding of both the players and the GM. For those who play RPGs for fun they do not have to think much about what is occurring around the table with regard to the three frames and bleed. However, for the applied GM knowing and understanding each of these components helps them understand how this tool can be used and what skills can be learned and practiced through play. A lot happens at the gaming table, and it takes time to learn how to attend to most of it. Still, as with most things, through practice the skills get easier and easier to weave together.

6

Using Tabletop Role-Playing Games for Specific Diagnoses

RPGs can be helpful with a variety of client types. This chapter examines ADHD, autism, social skills, learning disorders, anxiety, depression, and PTSD. Though RPGs can be used with more than the listed diagnoses and problems, these are a good place to start, as these are some of the commonest challenges that people face. For each of the diagnoses listed above, there will be a brief review of what the disorder is, followed by a discussion of why applied RPGs might be helpful for that diagnosis, what challenges a person with that diagnosis might have with playing RPGs, and which skills can be addressed with the game.

ATTENTION DEFICIT HYPERACTIVITY DISORDER

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a disorder related to the prefrontal cortex characterized by challenges with impulse control. There are four primary types of ADHD, predominantly inattentive, predominantly hyperactive, combined type, and undefined (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). In each subset of ADHD the symptoms are persistent from at least the age of 12, and are observable in several settings including work, home, and other areas of the person's life (American Psychiatric Association, 2022).

Those with ADHD often struggle with paying attention to details, utilizing sustained attention, and sitting still (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). Delayed gratification can also be particularly difficult to those with ADHD (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). Further, being organized and keeping

tabs of important items can frequently be tricky for those with ADHD (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). Those with ADHD can have difficulty keeping track of unrelated multistep instructions (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). They can also engage in times of hyper focus, especially if they are engaged in a rewarding and personally meaningful task.

How Applied RPGs Can Be Helpful

RPGs can be a helpful tool for those with ADHD as they naturally tap into the reward pathways of the brain. The in-game rewards for paying attention and staying abreast of information can be more immediate than may be seen elsewhere in the client's day-to-day life. For example, in the game the group could be gathering clues to solve a puzzle. Over the course of a single gaming session, the players can gather the pieces and solve the puzzle. Further, the applied GM can provide physical puzzles specifically for players with ADHD to give them something to do with their hands that is related to the game. Additionally, keeping a record for their character and understanding what their items do and how they can be used can be intrinsically rewarding, allowing the player the opportunity to practice being organized. If players can see how staying organized and paying attention positively impact their XP, this too can help increase engagement.

Challenges

Some specific challenges the applied GM needs to consider are that their players with ADHD may move around, lose items, and distract other players. When playing RPGs there are often dice, miniatures (referred to as minis, these are small-scale representations of characters made out of plastic or metal; they represent PCs, NPCs, monsters, and treasures, and game items), and other props on the table. For those with impulse control issues, not playing with everything on the table might be difficult. Having fidget toys available can be a very helpful way to allow players with ADHD to fidget in a way that is not disrupting to the other players.

Losing track of important items is a very common symptom of ADHD (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). It might be useful to have the player leave their character sheet and any other items needed to play with the applied GM, so that they have what they need each week. Alternatively, the applied GM

can keep copies. If the player remembers their needed items, perhaps they can get an in-game reward, such as an inspiration die.

Those with ADHD often have trouble sitting still or even staying in their seat (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). Players who move continuously or have difficulty remaining still may be distracting to other players. The GM will need to think of the group's mechanics and how the group members can work with one another. Sometimes pairing quiet and reserved players with players with ADHD can work well; other times the two do not work well together. It is crucial to think about who is in the group and how they work together. It might be necessary to help the player learn how to read social cues from other players to ensure that all are having a good time.

Possible Goals

There are many goals that can be addressed using RPGs. The player, their specific subtype of ADHD, the focus of the group, and the makeup of the different players will influence what goals are addressed in the RPG group. Some sample goals could be "Client will not roll dice until told to do so by the GM" (impulse control), or "Client will remember to bring their character sheet and dice 7 out of 10 weeks of the group" (organization), or "Client will take notes during the gaming sessions to refer to between sessions" (sustained attention). Each of these are helpful goals as they specifically address common challenges associated with ADHD, are measurable, and are easily observable by the GM.

How to Run Groups to Achieve Stated Goals

To achieve the previously stated goals, the applied GM might utilize techniques such as rewarding players for engaging in their goal behavior. For instance, if one player has the goal of not rolling dice until they have been instructed to, the applied GM can reward that player by allotting them an additional dice roll or giving them a special bonus for waiting until they were asked. Utilizing such rewards might also cause the other players to remind one another to engage in their desired behaviors. With the above example one could imagine other players saying something such as, "Wait, don't roll yet. You might get your bonus if you wait!" Having peer support can help the player remember their goals and be more engaged with the therapy process.

AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a developmental disorder that is associated with challenges with interpersonal connection, fixation on topics of special interest, and related impairments in cognitive functioning (Attwood, 2015). When the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Health Disorders, 5th edition* (*DSM-5*) was released in 2013, Asperger's disorder was absorbed into ASD. Those diagnosed with ASD will fall into one of three levels of severity, with 1 being the least severe and requiring the least support, up to Level 3, with the highest severity and requiring the most support (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). Those who in the past would have been diagnosed with Asperger's disorder now are diagnosed as having Level 1 ASD (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). There is much debate in the community as to the appropriateness of Asperger's disorder being taken in as part of ASD. However, it is beyond the scope of this book to examine this issue. Although those with Level 2 and possibly Level 3 autism can be part of applied gaming groups, the majority of those with autism in applied gaming groups have likely been diagnosed with Level 1 autism. Thus, this section will focus only on Level 1 autism.

Level 1 Autism

Level 1 autism, sometimes referred to as high-functioning autism, is notable in that the individual is often able to function independently, though they do best when they have some support (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). Those with Level 1 autism typically will have some deficits in social situations, specifically with communication, comprehension of social cues, and trouble with social reciprocity (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). There can also be challenges with rigid behaviors and difficulties with making changes to their routine or plans (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). Most interventions seek to teach those with Level 1 autism how to read social cues, engage in conversations, and self-soothe anxiety when plans change (Attwood, 2015).

How Applied RPGs Can Be Helpful

Research by Kelly (2015) demonstrated that using special interests when treating symptoms related to ASD can greatly impact the efficacy of such interventions.

Gaming is often a special interest of those with Level 1 autism (Kelly, 2015). Some, but not many, diagnosed with ASD will already have an RPG as their special interest. The game itself can be adapted to a player's special interests. For example, if a player with Level 1 autism enjoys anime, they can create a character that will be similar to an anime character they like. There are even game systems that use different settings that can tap into the special interests of the clients. For example, there are systems for *Power Rangers*, *G.I. Joe*, *My Little Pony*, and *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, among others. Being able to use a world that the player is familiar with and finds appealing can help to increase their buy-in for the game.

Furthermore, RPGs have rule systems that can help facilitate social interactions. Those with Level 1 autism can often struggle to see and understand social cues (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Having a gaming system with a rule structure helps players understand what is expected of them in a given situation (Oxendine, 2022). Not having to worry about the rules of the setting can decrease anxiety, which might help the player be more engaged with the intervention.

Challenges

Some obstacles that those with Level 1 autism might face are primarily related to struggles with psychological flexibility. *Psychological flexibility* is the ability to adapt and change with a situation. Those with ASD tend to engage in rigid ways of thinking (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). Such thought patterns can result in players with ASD only being open to one way of solving a problem or insisting that things have to be done "right." If the GM varies from rules as written (sometimes abbreviated as RAW) a player with Level 1 autism might have great difficulty with this, decompensate, and not be able to engage with the game. Moreover, if they are playing a character that is inspired by a favorite character from a TV show or comic (e.g., creating a fighter that is molded after Tanjiro from *Demon Slayer*), but their character does not have the exact same abilities as that character, they might become very frustrated. Depending on the individual, how well they manage the frustration can vary greatly. Some will point out their concerns but then move on without much issue, while others might get very stuck and be unable to move forward with the game if their concern is not addressed. When running groups that contain players with Level 1 autism, it is important that the GM knows how they will handle issues around

psychological flexibility.

> It might be advisable for the applied GM to have worked with the client's individual therapist to create a plan for how the player is to address frustration tolerance within the game. This way if there is a problem, the player and the GM already have a solution in place for how the player is to manage their anxiety.

Another common challenge that those with Level 1 autism may face is difficulty with theory of mind. *Theory of mind* is the ability to look at a situation from the perspective of someone else (Attwood, 2015). In this case, the player is asked during each game to look at the gaming world from the perspective of their character, rather than from how they would see the problem. Applied GMs need to be ready to think about how to help their players appreciate that they are seeing the world through the eyes of their character and how to coach players to improve this skill. One particular issue related to theory of mind is the player taking what happens to their character as a slight against them as a player. To put it in frame theory terms, experiencing confusion between frame one and frame three. Such confusion can cause the player to be angry at other players for the actions of their PCs, or to be angry at the applied GM for how the NPCs treat their PC.

Though socialization is more structured in an RPG, there is still a lot of back-and-forth and adjustments that can happen during a game. Those with Level 1 autism will do well when they know what is expected and how the game will flow; however, they likely will struggle if there is variation in how the game is run. Applied GMs might need to explicitly state what has occurred socially. This can be done through the use of process comments like, "So, as the bard was getting frustrated by the puzzle, we as players agreed to all work together to find a different solution to the problem, rather than trying to solve that puzzle."

Possible Goals

Some common goals that can be addressed using applied RPGs include increasing psychological flexibility, bettering theory of mind, improving conversation skills, strengthening social engagement, and learning to work as part of a team. As noted previously, psychological flexibility is likely the greatest problem that the player will have, which also indicates that playing applied RPGs offers the greatest opportunity for growth within that area.

Playing applied RPGs also offers one of the best tools for teaching those on

the autism spectrum about theory of mind. This can be achieved by helping players identify what their character is seeing and experiencing. Applied GMs will also want to help the player understand how their character's experience is different from what their experience is as a player.

How to Run Groups to Achieve Stated Goals

When running a group to teach emotional flexibility, the applied GM can assist the individuals through talking about skills at the start of the session and reminding them of said skills during gameplay. For example, the group could start off with a short discussion about having to change plans as new information is found. Then during the game, the group could make a plan for how to face a challenge and discover halfway through that some of their knowledge was incorrect or that additional information, which was found later, can change their plans. Examples of this could be that the villain they wanted to kill could have vital information needed to save a town, or that the dungeon they were told was abandoned is not. These kinds of situations can help players practice changing their plans and adapting in the moment. One of the strengths of applied games is that for the PC changes are happening quickly, while for the player they are able to talk through the situation with the rest of the group before having their character take action.

SOCIAL SKILLS

Though challenges with social skills is not a specific diagnosis, it is a common challenge for those with a number of diagnoses, such as ASD, anxiety, ADHD, and some developmental disorders. Challenges in social skills can range from having difficulty with engaging with theory of mind, to reduced skills in conversation, to limited empathy, to being too anxious or afraid to talk with peers. Those with poor social skills are more at risk for feeling isolated, facing loneliness, and experiencing negative outcomes due to such experiences (Matthews et al., 2016).

Broadly speaking the challenges related to social skills can be broken down into two main issues: challenges with conversation, and challenges with perspective taking. Problems in conversational skills include not knowing how to appropriately respond when someone initiates conversation or being able to

keep a conversation going. An example of this might be a person coming up and saying, “This has been a difficult day.” and the client responds with “Have you seen my keys?” The client did not pick up on the fact that the other person likely wanted to talk with them about what was happening in their day.

Having trouble with perspective taking can broadly be seen as challenges with theory of mind. Such challenges as noted above can be related to ASD and ADHD. People diagnosed with anxiety and depression can also have problems with perspective taking. For example, someone with anxiety might believe that everyone in the group is hyper focused on a small error that they made, and they will perseverate on this error continuously. They will fail to recognize that other members in the group probably do not think about them as much as they believe they do.

How Applied RPGs Can Be Helpful

RPGs can be an excellent method of addressing social skills as role-playing is built into the game itself. Those with social challenges are given the opportunity to practice social skills over and over again. Also, the GM can prime the clients by pausing the narrative to discuss how an NPC may be feeling and to help the clients learn the contextual cues that their character would see. In this way the player can also learn about such contextual cues.

For example, in one game the party was asked to travel to a town to locate a member of the city guard to let him know his sister had been killed in an attack on the town. The players found the person in question, and as soon as they met him said, “Oh, we need to let you know that your sister is dead. Now can you tell us more about what has been going on here?” The applied GM had the NPC ignore the PCs and go off on his own to sit. The players became frustrated with his reaction.

The applied GM paused the game to help the players process and discuss what had happened. The group discussed what it would be like living in a world where there is not easy access to instant communication, and how it would feel to suddenly hear that a family member had died. The players were eventually able to understand how upsetting the news would be and how the NPC might be feeling. The applied GM had them practice with one another how they would want to be consoled after such news. Then when the players felt that they knew how to address the issue, they went back into the game and worked on repairing the relationship with the NPC. Following the interaction, the group processed

what happened and learned how to better handle social interactions both in and out of the game.

Teaching social skills through play is another opportunity to utilize bleed-out. A player can interact as a character with more charisma and social skills than the player. Through coaching the player on the ways in which they can role-play such a character, the player will likely start to absorb some of the skills. The player may not become as charming as the character they created, but they can learn much from walking a mile in the character's shoes.

Challenges

Some challenges with addressing social skills in an RPG can be the amount of time that is needed to adequately address such issues. Early on the players might require a lot of coaching, and there might be more time spent teaching skills than playing the game. This might be annoying to any members of the group who do not have social skill problems. If other players become frustrated with the players requiring extra coaching on social skills, their frustration might reinforce the player's insecurities and worsen how they feel about their social abilities.

Possible Goals

Some possible goals to use for those struggling with social skills can be "Client will follow social script in three different sessions," or "Client will offer ideas without prompting three times during the course of the group." The goals will, of course, be dependent upon the individual client, their behavioral goals, and what is within the scope of the group to reasonably address.

How to Run Groups to Achieve Stated Goals

To help a player learn how to speak up and offer their ideas, the applied GM can utilize strategy meetings within the game. These can be short brainstorming sessions. In the first part of the session, have the players go through all kinds of ideas—good, bad, or just silly. The goal with such a session is to facilitate players with getting used to voicing their ideas. With the second part of the session, they can discuss the pros and cons of each idea. Utilization of strategy sessions will probably help players feel more comfortable speaking up without prompting. Also, as these strategy sessions follow a formula, they could lend

themselves to allowing members to follow social scripts.

SPECIFIC LEARNING DISORDER

There are three types of specific learning disorders, many of which co-occur with other disorders. Learning disorders fall within disorders that deal with written expression, with reading, and with mathematics (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). For most RPGs, writing is mostly done for the sake of the player, not for the group. Thus disorders with written expression are not as well addressed with RPGs, so these will not be discussed. Disorders of reading and mathematics can be directly addressed through RPGs and are discussed in the following section. Though the *DSM-5TR* classifies the disorders as impairment in reading/mathematics, I will refer to them as reading disorder and mathematics disorder. Though they are now antiquated terms, they are easier to read.

READING DISORDER

Reading disorder has three subsets: difficulty with reading accuracy, difficulty with reading rate or fluency, or difficulty in reading comprehension (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). Often interventions to help with reading disorder include practice and repetition. While such interventions are helpful, they typically are not enjoyable to the individual.

How Applied RPGs Can Be Helpful

Given that most RPGs use large rulebooks, reading comprehension, accuracy, and fluency are skill sets players will practice simply through playing the game. Though players who have trouble with reading comprehension may struggle with playing RPGs, the intrinsically rewarding nature of gaming may increase their task persistence. Thus, the more the player practices their reading skills, the more proficient they are likely to become. Davis and Johns (2020) even noted a case study in which a player's love of the game inspired them to read the rule books more. Additionally, the nature of RPGs is often rewarding for those who pay attention to the fine details of what they read. For example, sometimes noting one or two words in a spell can have a significant impact on how things

go in battle (e.g., creatures of your choice, rather than creatures in an area). Applied GMs can reward players with reading disorders who demonstrate reading comprehension or fluency during gameplay.

Challenges

For players who struggle greatly with reading comprehension and who are new to playing RPGs, the experience might feel overwhelming. Some of the character classes involve more reading than others (e.g., magic users, such as clerics, sorcerers, wizards, must read what their spells are and what they do). Such challenges can be overcome by having the applied GM work with the player to ensure they are choosing a class that will be approachable for them and to help them grasp the basic rules before having them read all the rules on their own.

Possible Goals

Goals for those with reading disorder could include enhanced fluency; improved ability to use written resources, such as rule books; and increased willingness to read. Such goals might be worded as “Client will demonstrate reading comprehension through accurately following instructions for spells 5 out of 10 weeks.” or perhaps “The client will correctly decode written instructions given to them in the group.”

How to Run Groups to Achieve Stated Goals

To help clients who have a reading disorder, the applied GM might utilize projects and assignments that the clients work on between sessions. These projects could include giving each player a cypher and a note to decode that gives them instructions for the next session. At the next meeting their character will need to act upon what the note told them to do without telling others what they are doing. The instructions might be something simple, such as “Bring a pear to the shopkeeper at the town square at noon.” While another player might be instructed to “Find a pigeon’s tail feather and place it in your hat.” The task should be something that the player can have their character do while the party is doing other errands so that it is not obvious. If the player can successfully complete their assignment, perhaps their character receives a magic item as a

reward.

MATHEMATICS DISORDER

Mathematics disorder has four subcategories: difficulty with number sense, trouble learning and recalling arithmetic facts, problems with fluent calculation, and math reasoning challenges (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). RPGs are well suited to provide players with opportunities to practice calculation and number sense; however, they do not offer many occasions to practice arithmetic facts or math reasoning. As noted previously, the game is intrinsically rewarding, and thus might help the individual engage more with practicing math.

How Applied RPGs Can Be Helpful

Many RPGs rely on basic math for gameplay. Though most games do not require any equations harder than adding or subtracting double digit numbers, this is done so frequently that it provides plenty of opportunities for the player to practice. Because most RPGs use dice, the player has a chance to manipulate the dice and discover tricks to help them add up numbers faster. For example, putting dice into sets that add up to five or ten is an effective method for adding up several dice quickly.

Challenges

Although the math involved in most RPGs is quite basic, it is done verbally in front of the rest of the group, so it may be highly anxiety provoking for those with mathematics disorders. Players might shut down and not even add up the dice they have rolled. Some accommodations might be to allow the player to use a virtual dice roller or to have them work in pairs where one rolls the dice while the other counts. The applied GM can provide a table to help the player convert their dice rolls to a total without having to do mental math, or they could allow the player to have a choice of set numbers rather than rolling for their outcome.

Possible Goals

Appropriate goals for those with mathematics disorder are “Client will add up

result of four rolled dice in under 30 seconds, 12 times during the course of a 10-week group," or "Client will manually do addition at least 50% of the time in the group," or "When asked to do math, client will demonstrate effective methods of self-soothing anxiety at least 50% of the time." Again, the goals will vary depending on the needs of the client and the structure and goals of the group.

How to Run Groups to Achieve Stated Goals

One way that an applied GM can help clients achieve such goals is through teaching the group math tricks, such as making sets of 10. The applied GM can also help to decrease anxiety around math by letting players have agency over whether they will do math on a roll. This can be achieved by giving the player the option of taking the dice average (for example, if they are allowed to roll 2d8+4, the average of that would be 13), or rolling. Though such a strategy is likely to mathematically benefit the player (as taking the average is often better for the player than rolling the dice) in the end that too can be beneficial. If a player who struggles with math can start to understand that they have a mathematical advantage, that will likely lead to growth and development for them.

ANXIETY

Many disorders fall under the umbrella term of anxiety. Anxiety can be generalized, specific to a phobic response, or tied to social situations or specific circumstances (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). Broadly speaking when discussing anxiety, it is a consistent and persistent worry and/or fear. Cognitively anxiety is challenging as a person with anxiety may have thoughts such as "This feeling will stop if you do . . ." When those with anxiety engage in the action their anxiety is telling them to do, they often experience a momentary release from the anxiety. Then the feeling tends to return and can often be stronger than it was before the person engaged in the coping behavior.

This creates a quandary as the person wants to be rid of their anxiety. Yet the more they engage in behaviors that they think will eliminate their anxiety, the more anxiety they experience. Therapy for anxiety often focuses on helping the person learn how to face their fears and make space for their feelings of anxiety (Wilson & DuFrene, 2010). Anxiety can be effectively treated through group

therapy (Barkowski et al., 2020). As noted previously, there are many forms of anxiety and most can be targeted through RPGs. This book will examine a few of the more common challenges seen: worry about making everyone happy/people pleasing, making the right decision, and not making mistakes.

How Applied RPGs Can Be Helpful

For those with anxiety focused on making mistakes or doing the wrong thing, RPGs offer players the chance to make mistakes in a place where there are no real-world consequences. The character can make blunders and the player can observe what happens to them as a result. In an RPG, the group has the ability to process and discuss social encounters right after they happen. If the applied GM wishes, there can even be do-overs for specific situations.

For those with social anxiety, RPGs also offer the unique opportunity for the player to ask the other players about how their respective characters are feeling or reacting to a given situation. This allows for the person with social anxiety to start to understand the motivation behind how others act in the world, so that they can better assess and appreciate the impact of their behaviors. For example, if an anxious player wants to help an NPC that the rest of the group does not, they can ask, “Are your characters upset that my character wants to do this mission?” The other players then are able to discuss what the reasoning is for their characters. As noted in previous chapters, it can be easier for the player to have the character ask for what they want and assert boundaries, as it is the character, not the player, standing up for themselves.

Challenges

Some specific challenges that might arise from having anxious players at the table can be indecision, unwillingness to speak up, and self-deprecating behaviors. Indecision is often the byproduct of a player wanting to make the “right” choice so that the other players at the table do not get angry at them. The player can worry so much about this that they can take a long time to do much of anything, or come to a point where they do not engage at all in the game. There are a few tools that the applied GM can use to overcome such a challenge. One is to have the player work with another player and have them make choices together. By sharing responsibility for making choices, the “blame” for a suboptimal choice is disbursed between the two. Further, the player can perhaps

start to find there is no right choice. Another method is to utilize a timer that limits how long the members of the group have to make choices, so they cannot have much time to think and instead have to act. An applied GM could also give the player with anxiety the role of creating chaos in the world. Using an item like the Deck of Wonders (a deck with 100 random things that can happen in a fantasy game) and letting the player bring arbitrary elements into the game can be a wonderful way for them to impact the narrative in unexpected ways (Gemhammer and Sons, n.d.).

For example, in a group one player was very anxious and wanted to make the rest of the group happy, but this fear paralyzed them from making choices. They were given the ability to have up to seven random events happen in each day within the game (thus if the session covered many days in-game, there could be upwards of 14 events). They were encouraged by the GM and the rest of the group to do this, and started doing so. The group found the random elements delightful and loved when the player brought them into the game. It became their character's defining role within the group, and as play went on the player started having their character do more of what they wanted and stopped worrying so much about the consequences as they were fulfilling their role of bringing a bit of chaos into the game.

Sometimes when the player with anxiety comes to the table, they are already so anxious that they do not even want to speak up. They shut down whenever a question is asked of them. A method the applied GM can use to help bring this player out of their anxiety and into the game is to have the character have an ability that is needed for the story. For example, perhaps this character is the only one who can see what direction the party needs to go in. The information should be something that can be communicated in a few words or even written as a note so the player is not forced to be verbal if they are not prepared for that. In this way, the player can still be a part of the group and serve an important function without having to speak much, if at all. Hopefully, after a few weeks the player may start wanting to talk more while in character, and perhaps even out of character.

Another difficulty with anxiety is those with anxiety can often put themselves down as a method of managing their feelings of worthlessness. This behavior can manifest in the player starting to say something then interrupting themselves with "No, that is stupid, never mind," or "Why am I so bad at this? I'm so sorry everyone!" or even just saying "sorry" after any decision they make. Such behaviors are difficult because there are a few things going on. First, the player

is putting themselves down and causing negative feelings toward the self. Second, the behavior is often a way for the player to ask for validation from the rest of the group. In other words, it is a way to give their anxiety the thing it says it wants so that it will go away. If the other players try to be supportive and reassure the anxious player that they do want to hear their ideas, it tends to reinforce the latter's anxiety, not decrease it. There are a few ways an applied GM can address these kinds of behaviors at the table. One can be to have a table rule of only being allowed one "I'm sorry" per game for an inoffensive gesture. It is okay and encouraged to say, "I'm sorry" for accidentally bumping into someone or interrupting someone who is talking, but it is not okay to apologize for giving one's opinion. Another would be to ask players to repeat what they said but without the "I'm sorry" and asking the table to not offer reassurance.

Possible Goals

Some skills related to the treatment of anxiety that can be specifically addressed with RPGs include decision-making, speaking up, self-advocacy, and facing fears. With decision-making, the previously mentioned methods of using a timer or a buddy in the group can help improve decision-making. A specific goal for decision-making can be "The client will make a decision on their character's actions within 30 seconds of being presented with a challenge."

For speaking up, this can be a goal that can be created for in character or out of character. Those with more social anxiety may find it easier to work on speaking up in character first. Recall that the character is a proxy; it is not viewed by the player as being them personally. When learning new skills there is often less resistance and fewer defense mechanisms erected when the character is practicing a skill. Challenges can be addressed through goals, such as "The player will have their character confront an NPC three times over the course of the group." The GM, of course, needs to ensure that sufficient opportunities to engage in such confrontations are created narratively. For the player the goal could be to have them speak up with their ideas. For example, "Without prompting, the player will speak up with their own idea four or more times during the course of the group." Again, the GM will need to ensure that there are enough chances for such skills to be practiced.

With regard to self-advocacy this again can be a goal that starts with in-character interactions and is then broadened to player interactions. A character goal for self-advocacy could be the character speaking up on how to use their

skills to help solve a given problem or to defend the group. For the player, this could be them speaking up and defending an idea that they have in the group. A goal in character might be “The player will have their character advocate for how to use their skills three times over the course of the group.” For a player goal it might be “The player will defend their ideas to the group two times during the course of the group.” The GM will need to ensure that they are providing sufficient opportunities for such skills to be practiced.

How to Run Groups to Achieve Stated Goals

To help players practice some of the previously stated goals, use of antagonistic NPCs can be one of the applied GM’s greatest tools. Create an NPC who is dismissive of the party and their ideas. When they interact with that NPC, talk with the group while out of character about how to handle the situation. Having NPCs who embody difficult situations that might be faced in life, such as someone else taking credit for your work, can help players practice self-advocacy and face some of their fears in interpersonal interactions.

DEPRESSION

Depression is categorized as a markedly depressed mood for a period of no less than 2 weeks (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). During this period the individual can experience sleep disturbances, loss of interest in activities, diminished sex drive, feelings of worthlessness, and difficulties with focus and concentration (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). Common depressive cognitions include thoughts that no one wants to be around them, that they are worthless, and questioning the point of engaging in different activities. Those with depression can be helped by actively engaging in their life. This often takes the form of engaging in hobbies, participating in physical activity, and being with friends.

How Applied RPGs Can Be Helpful

Applied RPGs can help those with depression connect with others in a shared experience that might allow them to work through some of their symptoms. A common cognitive distortion that those with depressive symptoms often

experience is the thought that people do not want them around. In a gaming setting, the GM can give the player an item that only works for their character but which is needed for the group to continue their objective. Though the player might note that the others only want them around because of the item, it can also help them see how they can be of use. This could be the start of them seeing that others do want them around.

The combat mechanic in most RPGs can be a helpful tool to get players to engage with the game. In most gaming systems what happens for each PC during combat is an individual decision that the player has to actively engage with. They have to take into account what is happening and choose what their PC will do.

Challenges

Some challenges that can arise for players with depressive symptoms include them not engaging in the game, not attending sessions, and undermining their ability to be a part of the game. Often those struggling with depressive symptoms will be in their own heads, and as a result not engaging with the world around them. When feeling depressed, the individual may engage in behaviors that increase the chance that others will react negatively to them, thus creating self-fulfilling prophesies. Applied GMs need to be aware of such behaviors and prepare for how to intervene should they arise.

Possible Goals

Goals for those with depressive disorders will likely be centered around activation. Such goals might be “Client will attend eight out of ten meetings of the group,” or “The client will offer their thoughts without prompting seven times over the course of a 12-week group.” Though more challenging to track, another possible goal might be “Client will decrease self-deprecating comments by 10% over the course of a 12-week group.”

How to Run Groups to Achieve Stated Goals

To help clients achieve these goals, the applied GM should work to help group members get used to offering ideas. The applied GM can reward and encourage such behaviors by providing inspiration dice to players who offer ideas. Applied

GMs can also offer in-game rewards, such as magic items that reinforce desired behaviors or a weapon that does extra damage the longer the player goes without demeaning themselves.

TRAUMA HISTORY AND POSTTRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER (PTSD)

Trauma is an ever-expanding field. Historically, for one to be diagnosed with PTSD they needed to be involved in or witness a traumatic event in which their life, or the life of another, was threatened. With the *DSM-5* and the *DSM-5-TR*, the diagnostic criteria has been expanded to include continual exposure to aversive details of traumatic events (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). In practice, the term *trauma* has been expanded to encompass events that are sometimes referred to as small "t" traumas. Such small "t" traumas can include being harassed, being ridiculed, or not feeling supported. Given that the two experiences can be quite different, both will be examined separately.

BIG "T" TRAUMA

Big "T" trauma is the type of trauma that is more associated with disorders like posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Such events are those in which the individual faced the very real possibility of their own death or bodily harm. Those who suffer from disorders such as PTSD will often experience intrusive and unwanted thoughts about the event, will engage in behaviors to avoid thinking of the event, and might experience flashbacks during sleep (American Psychiatric Association, 2022).

How Applied RPGs Can Be Helpful

RPGs can be a unique tool for those with disorders such as PTSD as they can allow for the person to face their trauma in a safe and controlled environment. Further, they are often facing their fears through the proxy of their character. Additionally, in traditional treatment for PTSD the person is working alone with their therapist. In an RPG setting the player has the rest of the group with them to support and help them during the encounter.

Of note for those with military related trauma, RPGs can offer a unique method for allowing the players to be in a setting that is similar to being in the military while not being a one-to-one comparison. Having the player be a part of an adventuring party can help them feel connected to a group in the same way they might have felt while deployed with their unit. RPGs also give those with military training a chance to apply some of the skills they learned while on active duty in the game.

Challenges

One challenge for working with those with PTSD is that it could be easy to inadvertently trigger an unwanted memory of a traumatic event. Those with PTSD can disassociate, and it may not be obvious to those at the table that their friend is experiencing a flashback. It is also possible that those with PTSD might underestimate how drawn in by the narrative they can become while playing. The emotional experiences from bleed might be more intense than they expected. Applied GMs working with clients with a trauma history likely need to be as explicit as possible in the informed consent when discussing the impact of bleed.

Regarding mixing different forms of big “T” trauma within a group, if one is running a group for those with PTSD it is important to consider what identified trauma the group members might have. If all of the members are survivors of sexual assault except for one military trauma survivor, it might not be a good fit. If the group consists of refugees and only one military member, again this might not be a good fit. While it can be challenging to only have group members that have a similar trauma background, it may be worthwhile. Having group members with vastly different experiences might be inadvisable in some cases while in others it might be exactly what is needed. The important point is that the therapeutic GM needs to be intentional and thoughtful concerning the makeup of their group.

When working with those with trauma, safety tools are a must. Safety tools (e.g., X-Cards, veils, and lines) let members easily and quickly tell the applied GM when a topic is making an individual uncomfortable or anxious. Safety tools also let the group decide what scenarios will be off the table. Players need to know what safety tools are going to be used at the table, how to use them, and should practice using them. The risk for inadvertent harm is greater when working with trauma as some will not want to fully share their trauma history, or

will hold it back as they do not believe it will come up in a session. Knowing how and when to use the safety tools at the table is vital to ensuring that players have the agency within the game setting to signal when things are getting to be too much for them.

> *On safety tools*: As will be discussed in the chapter on session zero, part of running a therapeutic RPG is the use of safety tools. There is a challenge when playing games face-to-face where there can be a perceived social pressure to not stop the narrative flow. Players might worry that if they were to use a safety tool they would be perceived as being the one who "kills" the story. There are a few ways that the applied GM can start to address this issue, one is by using a card or token for players to communicate that the narrative is drawing near a line. This is a signal to pivot, but not stop the story. Also, calling breaks "intermissions" can be helpful to reframe them as natural pauses rather than jarring stops of the story. Another method, borrowed from the Luxton technique, is to give players the ability to state what they need from a narrative moment rather than having the story completely change. Again, it is important to have the group practice the use of the tools to see how the applied GM will pivot and adapt a narrative, given the feedback from the players.

Possible Goals

Specific skills that can be addressed while playing RPGs for those with trauma can include learning how to stay in the present moment when facing potential danger, self-soothing, and asking for help when needed. For example, with learning how to stay in the present moment the goal might be "The client will learn how to utilize their coping methods and will be observed doing so during RPG group for at least half the weeks the group meets." Observable techniques could include using deep breathing activities, tapping, or tracking items in the room. Through in-game rewards players can be encouraged to ask for what they need and to give assistance to other group members.

How to Run Groups to Achieve Stated Goals

To help achieve the goals stated above the applied GM might utilize a mindfulness activity as an opening to each session. The group can practice grounding and mindfulness techniques throughout the game. The applied GM might give prompts along the lines of "I imagine your characters would all be getting nervous or anxious right about now, why don't we all take three grounding breaths." Once such behaviors are established as normative within the group, the applied GM can give rewards to players who use the techniques

without prompting.

SMALL “T” TRAUMA

Small “t” trauma is the trauma that builds over time. It can be thought of as trauma by a thousand cuts. Those who experienced small “t” trauma did not have their life or physical safety threatened as did those with big “T” trauma. However, they experienced ongoing, ever-present stress. Emotional abuse, bullying, and stalking would all fall under this umbrella. Small “t” trauma is not less problematic than big “T” trauma, it speaks more to the size of the events. While someone with a history of big “T” trauma may only have one or two traumatic events in their past, those with small “t” trauma can have dozens, if not hundreds, of events that led to their trauma load.

How Applied RPGs Can Be Helpful

RPGs can be a wonderful tool for treating small “t” trauma as it can allow the player to face events in a way where they have more agency, control, and support. Players can choose whether or not to face events that remind them of their past. Moreover, those who experienced trauma when they felt powerless can now confront and overcome challenges in a setting where they can feel powerful.

Applied RPGs can be helpful for those with small “t” trauma as it gives them a safe and controlled environment to start processing some of what happened to them. Through role-play the player can also have the chance to demonstrate autonomy that they might not have felt in the past. Players can set boundaries and have the chance to enforce their boundaries and to practice behaviors they might be working on in individual therapy.

Challenges

Some challenges with working with those with small “t” trauma can include the clients not wanting to discuss their trauma; having difficulty articulating all the elements of their trauma, not seeing it as being something noteworthy; or disassociation. Learning to recognize when a player is disassociating at the table is a vital skill for an applied GM working with trauma. Players might not want to

share what their specific trauma is or how it impacted them. So it might be difficult to fully understand what topics are off-limits in a game.

Possible Goals

Goals for those with small “t” trauma might include setting boundaries, asking for help, and practicing self-advocacy. An example goal might be worded as “Client will advocate for their needs through a proxy (character) five times over the course of a 10-week group,” or “Client will practice setting and enforcing boundaries through the use of a proxy (character) three times over the course of a 12-week group.”

How to Run Groups to Achieve Stated Goals

To help clients work toward these goals, the applied GM can offer role-playing activities where they state explicitly that the NPCs will be pushing on the boundaries of the players. By preparing the players, the applied GM can have them discuss how they would like their characters to handle such situations. Using such a technique has the added benefit of getting the whole group to work together, both to plan how to react and how to be supportive of one another.

DIAGNOSES THAT MIGHT NOT WORK WITH APPLIED RPGs

There are likely some disorders or challenges for which group therapy will be contraindicated. Those with eating disorders might not be effectively treated through the use of applied RPGs. However, because the focus of an applied RPG is playing a game rather than discussing eating and body image, someone with a comorbid eating disorder that is secondary to something (for instance anxiety), might be able to successfully be in an applied RPG group. Again, research is needed.

Those with oppositional defiant disorder (ODD) or conduct disorder (CD) possibly also would not fare well in an applied RPG game, especially in a mixed diagnosis group. If the applied GM is not specifically trained in how to manage those struggling with ODD or CD, there could be unintended disruptions to the game. The player with ODD or CD might have their character act out in ways that decrease the enjoyment of the experience for the other players.

Some with Level 2 or Level 3 autism might not be able to do well within an applied RPG group. Their difficulty with understanding social norms and the challenges to successfully converse with others might make being a part of an applied group difficult. The amount of attention and focus that the applied GM would need to pay to someone with Level 2 or 3 ASD might end up reducing the applied GM's ability to help other members in the group.

Clients with moderate to severe intellectual disability also might struggle with being in an applied RPG, especially if they are with average functioning players. There might be benefit in running a simple rule system RPG for those with moderate intellectual disability, though if one does, a homogeneous group of players with intellectual disability would likely be the most effective.

In the past there were concerns that those with dissociative or delusional disorders might not do well with playing RPGs. As noted in the review of literature, if the client is unable to maintain the four frames of applied RPGs, they will not function well in the group; however, just because someone has delusions does not necessarily mean that they cannot hold the four frames needed to be a part of the group. One study by Johnson and Quinlan (1980) examined the use of improvisational role-play with those diagnosed with schizophrenia. They found that role-playing was helpful for some (Johnson & Quinlan, 1980). More research is needed. While applied RPGs might not be contraindicated for those diagnosed with schizophrenia, an applied GM should use caution and be highly selective when including clients with this diagnosis as part of their groups.

There are also some people who do not enjoy imaginative play. Perhaps they have had bad experiences in the past, do not like the idea of storytelling, or are just not interested. These kinds of individuals are also not suited for an applied RPG group. It is important to recall that not every tool or intervention will work for every individual. Though RPGs as a whole are highly adaptable, they are not a good fit for everyone.

CONCLUSION

Applied RPGs seem to be an effective tool for a wide array of diagnoses. When considering having players with different challenges in an applied game, it is necessary to consider fit for the therapist, fit for the group, and how problems will be addressed. Considering if one wants to run a diagnostic homogeneous

group is also a key consideration. As always, it is good to do research to find any new trends in this budding intervention.

PART 2:

Running an Applied Tabletop Role-Playing Game

7

Overview

Though each applied RPG group will vary depending upon the individual GM, there are some commonalities that can be found in some, but not all, applied RPGs. This chapter will outline planning, recruiting members, establishing group norms, prepping a game, running a game, and performing aftergame tasks. Each of these elements will be explored in depth in the second half of the book with examples. The purpose of this chapter is to give a broad overview of what an applied game will look like from inception through completion.

PLANNING

When considering running an applied RPG, one must first consider the client population that they wish to work with, thinking through one's own training and experiences with the population, as well as considering any special circumstances or challenges that might arise. Once the client population is identified, the provider will want to determine the goals for the group, and then the skills or abilities they want the group members to learn from the experience.

Once the provider determines the client population and the general goals of the group, they can select a specific gaming system. When choosing a gaming system, the applied GM should consider the developmental ages of the players, any possible challenges the players might have with RPGs, and which systems will be best suited for such a purpose. Applied GMs also need to consider what gaming systems they feel most comfortable running. There can be instances where a specific game may be better suited to the clients and the group, but the provider is not well versed enough in that system to run it as an applied game.

Once a gaming system is chosen the provider must determine what, if any,

adjustments to the rules as written need to be created for their group. The provider should also consider what house rules they may want to introduce to help the group reach the stated goals for therapy. There should also be thought and consideration about what resources the players will need, like books or online tools, for play. Applied GMs will need to ensure that they have sufficient supplies, including dice, paper, and so on to successfully run the game.

Finally, the provider will want to select a date and time for the start of their group, and determine how many weeks to have their group run. Most applied RPG groups run for 10–12 weeks and tend to follow local school schedules, especially when the target population are school-aged clients. When deciding the length of a group, providers will want to consider how long it will take to help reach their desired goals for the group and what is a reasonable number of sessions to expect participants to attend.

RECRUITING PLAYERS

Once providers have planned their group, they need to find players who will be good matches for their group. Doing so includes ensuring that group members are diagnostically appropriate for the group, are available to attend the sessions, and are willing to engage. Providers might have to work to educate other providers as to the benefits of the players' participation in the group. This could include running demonstration games, giving talks, or sitting down with referral sources to build relationships. Most groups will want to have between four to six players. Having more than six players in a group can make it difficult for the applied GM to give sufficient individual attention to each player. With fewer than four players, it can become tough to run groups if one or more players do not attend a given session.

It is advisable for the provider to meet with each player and, if appropriate, their parents before the group starts. This way, the provider can answer any questions and learn what individual clinical goals there might be for that participant. Once the provider has a full roster, they can determine if any additional adjustments are needed for either the rules as written or their house rules to ensure the group can function well.

Before the first meeting of the group the provider will need to get informed consent and apprise the player of the limits of confidentiality. It is also advisable for the provider to use a form to have the player indicate any topics that they do

not want to see included in the game. This way the provider can establish these no-go topics at the first meeting and note them as being their own boundaries, so players do not have to experience the social pressure that can arise when around the gaming table.

SESSION ZERO

The first meeting of the group will be an opening session called session zero. Session zero is covered in depth in this section. During session zero several important topics are covered, including go and no-go topics, safety tools, house rules, and expectations for the game. Character creation might also be done during session zero. For some providers who use a collaborative model of world building, the basic elements of the story might also be created.

GO-NO-GO TOPICS

When creating games, it can be important to give players agency to annotate what they would like, and not like, to see in the game. Reynolds and Germain wrote an ebook for Monte Cook Games (2019) called *Consent in Gaming* in which there was a page where players could annotate several different topics as either being red (subjects they do not want in the game), yellow (issues that can be used sparingly), or green (topics that players are all right with being in the game). This tool is helpful for the players and the applied GM as it starts to establish the boundaries of this group's magic circle.

SAFETY TOOLS

Safety tools are an agreed upon set of rules used to allow players to communicate discomfort with a topic or theme that is arising in the game. Safety tools are a requirement for therapeutic games. There are three primary safety tools that are used in the RPG community. They are lines and veils, the X-Card, and the Luxton technique (Sheldon, 2019; Reynolds & Germain, 2019). This author proposes a new set of safety tools—called dynamic safety tools—that were influenced by all three techniques. This method is outlined in detail in the

chapter on session zero. Safety tools need to be easy to understand, easy to use, and usable by the players and the applied GM.

HOUSE RULES

House rules are rules that are not standard to a gaming system yet are utilized at a specific GM's gaming table. Examples of these rules include not rolling dice unless asked, not speaking if someone else is talking, or not speaking unless they have the speaking totem. It is important that if house rules are being used, they are discussed and provided to the players either in writing or as a verbal reminder at the start of the session.

BEHAVIORAL EXPECTATIONS

For some therapeutic games outlining behavioral expectations is more important than for others. For example, groups focused on social skill development will likely have more specific behavioral expectations for players. Creating specific expectations can be important for therapeutic groups as this creates a frame to better understand how one is supposed to behave and which behaviors are acceptable and which are not. Players with anxiety likely will benefit from such information as will those on the autism spectrum.

CREATING CHARACTERS

When generating characters for therapeutic games, it is advisable to have the applied GM either totally make or greatly assist in the character creation process. Doing so helps ensure that the applied GM is aware of what the character's abilities are, that everything on the character sheet is done correctly, and that the character is created quickly. Though players can create characters on their own, it might end up taking more time as there can be errors and the applied GM then may not know the characters' capabilities. Players could also end up making characters that do not fit with the rest of the group. The more the applied GM helps with character creation, the less likely it is that players will end up with "lone-wolf" type characters.

During the character creation process, it can be helpful to have the group work on creating bonds between the different characters. This helps to get the group functioning like a unit and figure out how they all can work together. Additionally, giving the PCs premade bonds can inspire more role-playing between the players, which will facilitate the game and story.

ADDRESSING PROBLEMS

Another topic to communicate during session zero is how problems are addressed. For example, how the group will handle it if a player has a panic attack or has a traumatic memory triggered. If the applied GM needs to speak individually with a player, what will the rest of the group do during that time? If there are arguments between players, how will those be resolved? Hopefully, the group will run smoothly without issues. However, it is best to have a plan for how to address the most likely problems rather than having to react in the moment when a problem arises.

WORLD BUILDING

Though not always used, there is a technique developed by Davis and Johns (2020; Game to Grow, 2018) called the Collaborative Home-Brew System that some providers choose to utilize during session zero. In the Collaborative Home-Brew System the players help to create the campaign map, name the landmarks on the map, and then create stories about these landmarks. This system helps applied GMs identify what topics are most interesting to their players, allowing them to craft a compelling narrative.

CAMPAIGN PREPARATION

Once session zero has occurred, the applied GM will have a better idea as to the group's interests, which will allow them to create a good story hook. Generally, RPGs feature adventures that involve saving a place, solving a mystery, obtaining a special item, gaining treasure, or slaying a beast. The applied GM will want to select which story trope they will be using, then craft a narrative that

will fit within the length of the campaign. The provider will want to include a central source of tension, adversity to overcome, and allies to aid the players. Hopefully, the story can also come with personal story hooks for each player. These story hooks can be used to help the player work on their individual therapy goals, as well as help the PC grow and develop in ways the player is hoping to see.

SESSION PREPARATION

For each individual session, the applied GM will want to consider where in the story the group is, what plot hooks and devices the PCs will encounter, and how therapeutic themes can be woven into the narrative. The applied GM will also want to consider which individual goals they can address in the session through providing opportunities for growth. The GM will also want to prepare any monsters for combat encounters, or create NPCs for social encounters. If they are using maps and minis, the GM will want to select appropriate ones.

Session notes can be vague or highly detailed. The amount and length of preparation notes is not indicative of how well or poorly the game will go. The notes are there for the sake of the GM and reflect their desired level of preparedness. A recommended resource for understanding how much to prepare for a typical RPG session is the *Return of the Lazy Dungeon Master* (Shea, 2018). This method recommends only using a note card to prepare. This way should the group decide to do something different, the GM only loses a notecard's worth of preparation. Often newer GMs prepare more, including detailed notes of where to go and what to do in each game. As GMs gain experience, their confidence in running the game based on improvisational skills grows, so fewer detailed notes are needed. The number of notes used to prepare is highly subjective; there is no right or wrong answer in regards to how much to prepare.

RUNNING A SESSION

Running a game will typically have three parts: introduction, gameplay, and conclusion. During the introduction, the group is coming together and activities might include checking in on how everyone is doing, inviting players to share

stories, and doing a check-in question. The GM can have a player give a recap of the previous session or they might do so themselves.

Gameplay will run for usually 60 to 90 minutes. The players will engage with one or more of the pillars of play. For some groups, there might be a discussion of skills that they are trying to master and of the opportunities within the narrative to practice such skills. Other groups might involve processing and talking through different parts of the story. These pauses give the group a chance to explore the themes and goals the GM was hoping the group would dig into.

The game can conclude with the applied GM posing an exit question or giving the group a problem to reflect on during the week. Other groups will close with time to process and discuss what happened during the game. The amount of processing will depend upon the goals and structure of the individual group.

Often sessions will not go as planned. Preparing for how players will act and react to the gaming world can be very difficult to predict. It is advisable that applied GMs learn storytelling and improvisational skills to help them pivot the narrative around the actions of the players. When the story is a shared experience between GM and players, it is often much more enjoyable.

AFTER-GAME TASKS

Following the running of a therapeutic game, the GM will need to write down what occurred during play and observations for their players. If the group is a process orientated group, the applied GM will need to write group therapy notes. These notes will discuss what occurred in the session in regards to the goals being worked on, how many players were there, and will include an individual note for each player. The GM can also write a summary to read at the start of the next session along with any other notes to prepare themself for the next game.

ENDING THE CAMPAIGN

On the last week of the group, the applied GM will want to ensure that they are able to bring the narrative to a satisfying conclusion. A satisfying conclusion does not mean a happy ending, just an ending. A campaign should not stop in the middle of combat, or right as the heroes arrive at the final dungeon. Applied

GMs, much like hobby GMs, have to practice timing, pacing, and storytelling to ensure that they are able to bring their narrative to a satisfying conclusion.

When planning a campaign, it can be helpful for the GM to consider which parts of their story can be removed due to time constraints. The GM also will want to have an idea of how to ease the players along if they get stuck. This can be done with questions, with an NPC guide, or even with an Indiana Jones–style boulder barreling toward the group and forcing them to run forward.

Applied RPG groups often do not look much different from hobby groups when observed from the outside. Players are sitting around a table, rolling dice, and telling a story. Sometimes there will be moments to process, or time for the applied GM to talk through a skill. Other than those minor changes, an applied game can look much like any other game. Despite the game not looking like therapy (whatever that might mean!), there can be myriad of therapeutic growth and development happening at the table. Again, the applied GM often needs to find a way to work through their biases and beliefs about play to help them see the benefit of telling a story and rolling dice in their groups.

The rest of this volume will expand upon the concepts that have been discussed in this chapter. It is important to recall that all of these steps and processes get easier the more one practices running games for friends and applied players.

8

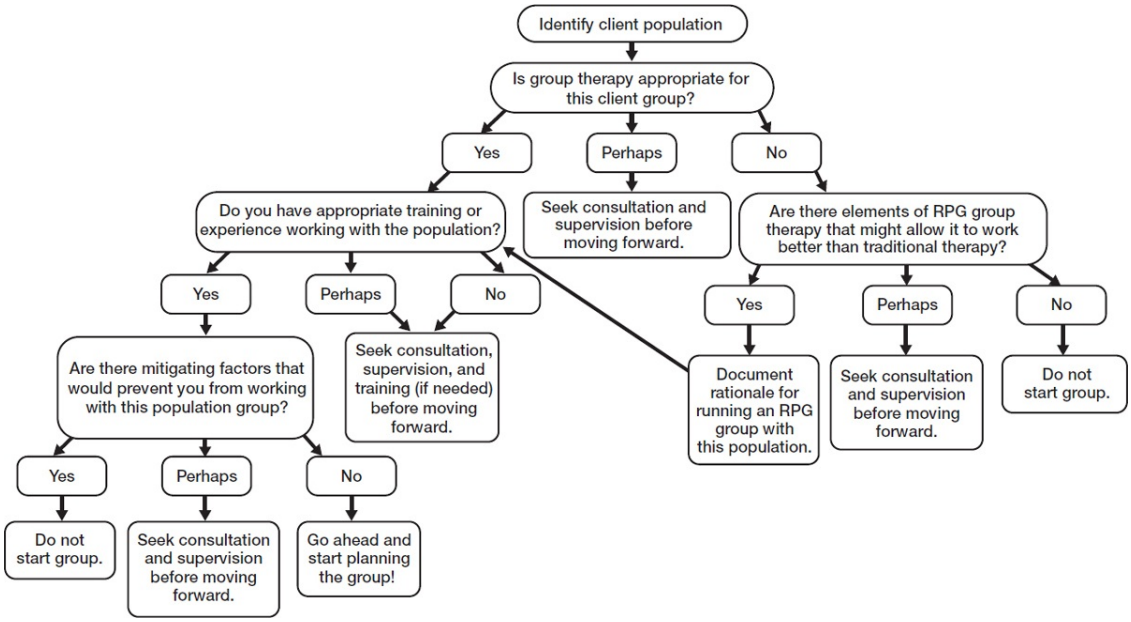
Planning Your Group: Client Selection

From concept to the first session, and planning sessions throughout, there is a lot of work that goes into creating applied RPGs. This chapter will discuss how to select a client population and what to consider when running a game for that population, including how to find referral sources and how to interview perspective participants. The following chapters discuss considerations for planning other aspects of applied RPGs in greater detail—for example, choosing an appropriate gaming system, ethics, documentation concerns, goal setting, campaign planning, preparing for the session, and refining the campaign plan.

SELECTING CLIENT POPULATION

Before a provider starts planning an applied RPG, they must consider who the targeted players will be and if RPGs will be a good fit for such players.

A good decision tree would be as follows:


Identify client population
Is group therapy appropriate for this client group?
Yes
Perhaps
No
Do you have appropriate training or experience working with the population?
Seek consultation and supervision before moving forward.
Are there elements of RPG group therapy that might allow it to work better than traditional therapy?
Yes
Perhaps
No
Are there mitigating factors that would prevent you from working with this population group?
Seek consultation, supervision, and training (if needed) before moving forward.
Yes
Perhaps
No
Document rationale for running an RPG group with this population.
Seek consultation and supervision before moving forward.
Do not start group.
Yes
Perhaps
No
Do not start group.
Seek consultation and supervision before moving forward.
Go ahead and start planning the group!

Is group therapy contraindicated for this client population; why or why not?

If group therapy as a whole is not good for that specific client population, one must consider carefully if pushing to do an applied RPG instead will have the desired results. Simply because group therapy is contraindicated for some client populations does not mean that applied RPGs cannot be used. One must consider why a group setting might not be ideal for the client population, and whether the structure and presentation of an applied RPG can mitigate these factors.

If group therapy is found to be effective for a client population, it is important to understand how group therapy is helpful for that population. Doing so allows the applied GM to determine whether the structure of an applied RPG will erode what makes group therapy effective for that client population. Again, the therapist will need to determine whether an applied game will work well for that population.

Are you sufficiently trained to work with this client population?

As will be discussed further in the chapter on ethics, behavioral health providers are beholden to their code of ethics, which stipulates that a provider must have sufficient training with any client population they wish to work with (American Counseling Organization, 2014; American Psychological Association, 2016; National Association of Social Workers, 2017). This might indicate that the provider needs additional education, training, or supervision if they do not have

the required experience.

Are there any mitigating factors that would prevent you from working with this population group?

It is important that behavioral health providers be aware of their own personal limitations, biases, and other factors that might hinder them from running an applied RPG with their desired population.

From a best practices perspective, it is advisable for providers to answer the above questions in writing and to keep this documentation. Next the provider would want to look into needs for that client group. For example, a provider might wish to run an applied RPG group for those on the autism spectrum, but they might find that there are not enough clients on the spectrum in their area to fill their group. Learning such information early is important as it prevents the provider from spending too much time trying to run a group that likely cannot be filled. Additionally, the provider might discover that by broadening their group to include those diagnosed with ADHD, they now have enough demand to fill two or more groups. All of this will depend on where the provider is located and what resources are available to them.

Example

The applied GM of our example group wants to run a group for those who identify as female (hereafter called girls) and who struggle with anxiety.

Is group therapy contraindicated for this client population; why or why not?

Anxiety has been found to be effectively treated in a group setting, therefore there is foundational research and imperial support for running a group focused on treating anxiety (Barkowski et al., 2020).

Are you sufficiently trained to work with that client population?

This provider has graduate training and has worked for over five years with those diagnosed with anxiety. They also have specific training in group therapy.

Are there any mitigating factors that would prevent you from working with that population group?

Because this provider has brought several individual clients to successful termination of treatment and also has experience with running groups, there do

not seem to be any issues that would prevent them from running the group.

The provider also knows that there is a sufficient number of clients in the area who could fill their group.

REFERRALS AND RECRUITING PLAYERS

Once the client population has been determined and the provider has chosen a gaming system it is time consider how to acquire participants. Many providers who wish to start applied RPGs recruit game participants from among their own clients or the clients of their colleagues. While such recruiting is effective and may be sufficient to fill a group, it is also advisable to consider outside referrals to increase the group's diversity. When considering referral sources, it is important to consider who the stakeholders are for the desired population and how to reach these stakeholders. For example, primary care doctors might be the best point of contact for some clients, while school counselors might be better for others. Providers may need to run marketing events to help educate those who have the most access to the desired client population about why RPGs may help their own students or patients.

It is important when advertising for the group that the provider does not overstate what clients should expect. For example, one cannot guarantee that symptoms will be alleviated by attending the group. Although they can note that research, if such research has been completed, shows that applied RPGs can be beneficial. Advertising will be discussed later in the Documentation chapter.

Example

To advertise and recruit for the example group the applied GM created flyers for their clients and for colleagues to give to their respective clients as well. They met with faculty advisers for school *D&D* groups. They also offered to run a game for some of their colleagues who see client populations that would fit with the mission of the group.

INTERVIEWING PARTICIPANTS

As one receives referrals for the group, it is advisable to interview each

participant to answer their questions and ensure that they are a good fit for the group. When one is starting out as an applied RPG therapist, there is a desire to just have groups be filled. It is best to ensure that all the group members will work together well. For example, when running a group for those with PTSD, if four participants all have combat-related PTSD and one has PTSD related to a military sexual assault, they might find that the group is more triggering and harmful than helpful. Interviews for participants do not need to be long or involved. The applied RPG therapist primarily wants to see if the client fits their desired client population, if they understand what the group will be like, and if they will be a good fit with the other participants.

Example

The applied GM from the example group had seven referrals. Two were not interviewed as their schedules did not match with that of the group. A third was determined to not be a good fit for the group due to their lack of interest in playing an RPG. The four remaining referrals were all determined to be a good fit both for the group and for working with one another.

Choosing a Gaming System

This chapter will discuss both the different gaming systems and how to choose a gaming system in greater detail. However, a few questions that the provider should answer during the planning phase are:

- What system(s) do I feel most comfortable running?
- What aspects of an applied RPG do I see my targeted population struggling with the most? Am I able to adapt the system enough to help them work through their struggles?
- What system do I believe my population would find the most enjoyable and engaging?
- What system will assist me in teaching the therapy skills I want my clients to gain?

There are hundreds, if not thousands, of different tabletop RPG systems and settings. These include genres like high fantasy, science fiction, superhero, steampunk, survival, and more. There are even adaptations to systems that allow players to play a wide range of different character options from some of popular media's most beloved series. There is no one right or wrong system to play. The point is to find the system that works best with the goals the applied GM wants to achieve within their game, and which will be effective and enjoyable for their players.

With all of the possible options available to the applied GM, it can be difficult to determine what system is best for their purposes. If running a game for children, do you use a system like No Thank You, Evil! or an adaptive model such as Wardlings for *D&D 5e*? Do you use something like Critical Core, which

was designed to be used in schools and therapy settings? This chapter will help the applied GM walk through the decision-making process for figuring out which game will best suit their specific group.

All this being said, there is no such thing as the "perfect game for . . ." If you as a GM do not like *D&D*, do not use *D&D* even if that is the system most used by other applied RPG therapists. At the end of the day, applied GMs need to use systems they are comfortable with.

> Something both wonderful and a bit anxiety provoking about most RPG systems is how open they are to change. If you love the rule system for *D&D* but want to play it in the *Star Wars* universe, there is nothing stopping you from making that work. As RPG systems are so adaptable, there is no one right way to run any given gaming system. Some clinicians and gamers find this a bit anxiety provoking. It might be helpful to think of gaming systems as different types of clay. You can mold the clay into anything you want, though some types of clay are more effective for certain projects than others. For example, while you can make a vase out of Play-Doh, it is not the most effective medium for the job. You can also give children expensive white clay to play with, but it may not be as enjoyable for them as Play-Doh. There is no right way to use or adapt any given rule system out there. Ultimately the question the applied GM needs to ask is "How do I want to use this system?" rather than "How is this system supposed to be used?"

WHAT IS IN A GAMING SYSTEM?

Rules

When the term *gaming system* is used, this indicates the rules and methods that are applicable for any given RPG. A term that is often used in association with different systems is crunchy. In this instance the term *crunchy* refers to how intensive the rules are. Systems with more rules and more nuanced interpretations of those rules tend to be crunchier games. *Fluff* tends to indicate a system that is lighter on rules and driven more by the narrative flow of the story.

The first question that an applied GM should ask is how crunchy a system do they wish to use? The answer to this question will be heavily influenced by the group's players. Are the players likely to enjoy lots of rules or would they do better with fewer rules? Diagnoses, developmental age, and resources to learn more about the game outside of the group should all be factors in this decision-making process. Additionally, will the specific set of rules enhance the therapeutic goals? Or will these rules get in the way of achieving therapeutic

engagement?

Another important factor when considering crunchy versus fluff is how comfortable the GM is with running a rules-heavy versus rules-light game. In a rules-heavy game, the cognitive load for the GM will be increased. There could also be an uptick in how much the players will debate the rules. Such debates and discussions may be welcome, or they may instead distract from the primary function of the group. Again it is up to the applied GM to determine what will work best.

The following point cannot be stressed enough: if one believes that a certain gaming system rule set would be most applicable for their client population but the applied GM does not feel comfortable running that system, do not use it. A therapist might know that a certain intervention is most recommended for a client; however, if they are not trained in that modality, it would be unethical to use it. The same principle applies to different gaming systems. The rule system is only effective if the applied GM feels confident to use it in an applied setting.

World

Once one has an idea of the kinds of rules they would like to have for their campaign, it is time to think of what setting would be the best fit for the type of game they want to run. As noted above there is a gaming system for just about every type of genre out there. Also, as mentioned earlier, any gaming system can be adapted to any setting that you choose; some are just easier to adapt than others.

For example, if one wishes to run a sci-fi game but is most familiar with the *D&D 5e* rule system, spells can be re-flavored to represent technology. Spell slots can be revamped as energy packs to run tech. Making these adaptations can be a lot of work for the GM; so it may be easier to learn a whole new gaming system rather than trying to modify a system into something that works with the desired setting.

Another possibility to consider is combining two systems together to fit the world that one wishes to create. Taking some rules from one system and some from another to create a bespoke system that best fits the desired setting can be highly effective. Ultimately, one wants a gaming system that best fits within the world the game will be played in.

When thinking about the world consider the following. Does the world have magic? Does the world use technology? What are the defining characteristics of

this world (e.g., how does it stand out from similar settings)? What elements are critical for ensuring that the world maintains its overall aesthetic?

An example to illustrate these considerations with a well-known property could be *The Lord of the Rings*. It is a high fantasy with a Middle Ages-like setting. There are no guns, and while there is magic it is very rare and difficult to use. The defining characteristics of this world are centered around the culture and heritage of all of the different groups. Objects, for instance rings, are named and have stories. Exploring this world is a dive into the history of each location visited. Some of the most important aspects of Middle Earth (the setting of the game) are reflected in the naming of places and of knowing the lineage of NPCs and the major powers in the world. Thus, a rule system that would work for Middle Earth would not have much magic and would be very focused on story elements. If this is what you are looking for, there is an official RPG that is set in Middle Earth, so there is no need to reinvent the gaming wheel!

The point is that for any world or setting you can imagine, you can most likely find, or create, a gaming system that can work within that framework.

> A note about the problematic elements in some gaming systems: As will be discussed further in the Diversity Issues chapter, there are some problematic themes and elements in certain gaming systems. For the applied GM, one of the most problematic concepts is the idea of sanity scores and sanity meters. Many of those struggling with psychological issues can find these elements alienating. Furthermore, such concepts may reaffirm a player's belief that there is something fundamentally wrong or broken within them. When choosing a system, it is critical to look out for any of these elements and determine how important they are to the game as a whole. Some can be easily removed or adjusted, while others occupy such a central focus of the game that removing them would be very difficult. Other topics that will be discussed more in the Diversity Issues chapter include cultural appropriation and representations of race, diversity, and physical disability.

Magic and Special Abilities

Being able to do amazing things or having cool abilities that are outside of one's routine existence can be part of the charm and allure of RPGs. Most gaming systems have some form of special abilities or magic. Thinking through how such items and abilities can play into the therapeutic game can be very important when considering a gaming system. For example, perhaps you want players to focus on the abilities that they possess in real life and not distort such abilities with magic or enhanced items. You could consider using a system similar to *Kids on Bikes*, where abilities are more tied to real-world skills, including being good

with cars or having natural charisma. Another option is *Outbreak: Undead,* where abilities are related to the real-life experiences of the player, which can be helpful for capturing that sense of realism.

Perhaps you want to inspire creative thinking and problem-solving in your group, so there might be even more magic and extraordinary items than in a typical fantasy setting. For such a group, using the Eberron system for *D&D 5e* might be helpful because magic is infused in almost every aspect of life. Rather than an adventure, you can have your group work as city planners for a city that has access to magic. In such a case you could challenge the group to think through how they might use magic to shape both the world and the cities within it.

Another factor to consider is how complex the magic/technology system is within the game. For some systems, all a player has to do is note that they are using an ability or spell, and then roll the dice. While in others the player has to spend time role-playing gathering ingredients and might have to roll to see if they can use a spell or ability before even attempting it. Applied GMs will want to think through how they might use the mechanics of the magic/technology system within the game and determine if that system will help or hinder the therapeutic process.

Cost

When considering what gaming system to use another helpful consideration is the cost and accessibility of the game. For *D&D 5e* there is an online resource called D&D Beyond that the applied GM can pay for, which will allow the applied GM's players to see and access the books they have digitally purchased. This allows the players to read up on the rules and abilities on their own time at their own pace, and at no additional cost to the players. While players have the ability to buy the materials for any system, some can be very costly with books ranging in price from $20–$60.

If getting the materials for the game is prohibitive for the targeted client population such a system is likely not a good fit. The applied GM should think about having a reading room that their group members can use between sessions to review the books for the game. While reading up on rules and abilities between games is probably not necessary, many players enjoy doing so. They might even find that it enhances the experience for them. Applied GMs do need to consider how to ensure that the game system they are using is accessible to

their players.

> Another resource for applied GMs to consider would be their local gaming stores. Many stores have books available as references that people can look through. If having a reference room at their practice is not easily done, perhaps the applied GM can work to have books available through a local library or game store for their players to access and read.

Developmental Level of Players

As noted previously, some systems are much crunchier than others. When selecting a game, it is important to consider not just the age, but the development of the prospective players. If the group is going to be of younger players, and they fit the age range, consider No Thank You, Evil!. This game's system was designed to be more friendly to young players and has rules that can easily be added or removed if necessary. If they are quite advanced for their age, they will likely respond more favorably to a system similar to Emberwind, a fantasy setting with magic and dynamic rules that requires all the players to work together as a team. For each game consider how much base knowledge is needed, how much math is used, and what themes exist in the game's setting.

Along with emotional developmental level, reading abilities also need to be considered. Some gaming systems can be easily understood with a fourth-grade reading level, while others are more technical and require an advanced reading level. Each system typically notes the minimum age of players for the game. This can be a good starting point when considering the developmental appropriateness of a system.

Player Desires

Some players will want to go out and kill all the monsters, while others do not want to fight but instead to make friends. Think about how the rules of the system allow for the players to have options that fit their personality and the desired goals of the campaign. If a system makes avoiding combat difficult, but the players like to try creative solutions rather than combat, find a system that will allow their creativity to shine.

Understanding player desires can also help the applied GM consider what type of game to run within a system. For example, one can run a very combat heavy game of *D&D*, or they can run a *D&D* game that is more focused on

problem-solving and building relationships. While some systems lend themselves more to one pillar of play over another, most systems will have the ability to engage in each of the three pillars to different extents.

Popularity of the Game

It is hoped that after the campaign players try to play RPGs on their own and perhaps use them as a tool to make friends. If that is one of the goals of the applied gaming group, using a highly niche game, while it might be most appropriate for therapy, can make it difficult for that player to find others who also play. Games such as the *Cypher System*, *D&D*, *Pathfinder*, and *Starfinder* are all quite popular. For many it can be easy to find a group that plays these games. Applied GMs might also hope that some of their players will already know how to play the gaming system that will be used. By using a more niche game it is less likely that the applied GM will find players who are familiar with the gaming system. However, if the applied GM thinks teaching all of their players how to play together will be beneficial for their group, utilizing a lesser known system might be exactly what is needed.

EXAMPLE

For the example group, the provider is going to utilize the fifth edition of *D&D* (*5e*). They wish to use this system for three primary reasons. First, it is the system they know the best and have the most experience with. Second, they believe that *5e* is flexible enough to address a wide array of therapeutic goals while also being adaptable for different client needs. Third, *5e* is the most played RPG, thus teaching the group members a gaming system that they can easily play outside of the therapy setting.

CONCLUSION

There are many factors to consider when choosing a gaming system for an applied RPG. It is advisable for the applied GM to be open to trying many different systems and methods of playing to help them find the system that works best with their individual group. Because there is no one right system that

will work for every group, it might take the applied GM some time to find the right gaming system and style for their groups.

10

Diversity Considerations

Representation matters. Though most RPGs occur in a fantastical setting, many do not do an adequate job of representing diversity, whether that be diversity of sensory differences, cultural backgrounds, body types, ages, races, or gender expressions. Thankfully there has been much improvement in terms of representation and in the RPG community's willingness to discuss problematic themes within many RPGs. Since 2019 such changes have become visible (Brodeur, 2018; Di Placido, 2020; Limbong, 2020; Wizards of the Coast, 2020). Though anyone can pick up an RPG and adjust the setting and aesthetic to be more inclusive, it is imperative for applied GMs to have an understanding of the issues within the greater RPG community. The aim of this chapter is not to place blame, nor is it to villainize any person or game. Rather the aim is to educate the applied GM on some of the issues that players may have seen in the past, and to help them understand how these problems started. It is also my hope that this chapter can shed some light on what is being done to improve representation in the greater RPG community. This chapter will discuss the history of diversity issues within RPGs, recent events and concerns, and what steps are being taken to make improvements within the greater RPG community. As I am most familiar with *D&D*, most of the discussion will be focused on *D&D*, this is not to say that other systems do not have issues. It has more to do with the fact that *D&D* is the most widely played and widely known RPG, which is why it will be the primary focus of this chapter.

An issue that is worth discussing is for one's awareness of their own biases. Those who enjoy gaming are often labeled as geeks or nerds. Geek culture has become its own subculture (Curran, 2011; McArthur, 2009; Yen et al., 2016). There are many stereotypes about who geeks and gamers are, what they look like, and how they behave (Curran, 2011; Nephew, 2006). Due to the negative way in which gamers are often perceived,

they can at times feel defensive about their love of gaming (Mello, 2006). The reality is that there are many types of geeks and gamers in the world. One cannot let their own biases of geeks cloud the reality that is the diverse and expansive types of players who are in the greater RPG community.

HISTORY

A Review of Monsters

Many of the early monsters in RPG games, in particular *D&D*, were influenced by European myths and legends (Peterson, 2012). Though times have changed, the foundational material has not. Often what serves as the germinating seed of a product is carried forward, even if that idea or tradition is now outdated (Grouling Cover, 2010). Thus, early themes from *D&D*, such as monstrous women and dark skin being equated to being evil, have persisted into the fifth edition of *D&D*.

Reviewing the monsters in *D&D*'s primary monster book, the *Monster Manual* (Mearls & Crawford, 2014a) one will find that of the 153 monsters, six are specifically female-only monsters: banshee, dryad, medusa, marilith, hag, and succubus (Mearls & Crawford, 2014a). However, there is only one male-monster: the incubus (Mearls & Crawford, 2014a). Of note, many creatures are depicted as both male and female, for instance the Yuan-ti; however, they are primarily portrayed as being female (Mearls & Crawford, 2014a). When one goes beyond the *Monster Manual* to books like Kobold Press's *Tome of Beasts*, there are even more monsters characterized as female, including the seductress, sirens, and drowned maids (Harris et al., 2016). Interestingly, many of the monsters that are described as powerful leaders of their respective realms, namely liches or vampires, are depicted as being male (Mearls & Crawford, 2014a).

A 2020 article by Stang and Trammell examined the use of the female body as a monstrous form. In their review of *D&D*'s *Monster Manual*, they noted how women are dehumanized through their representation as hags, spiders, sirens, banshees, medusas, and other monsters (Stang & Trammell, 2020). Having so many monsters be female-presenting can be concerning. Often the only way players interact with such creatures is through violence, and killing monstrous women might in some ways contribute to sexist patriarchal thinking patterns

(Stang & Trammell, 2020). Perhaps the most historic and sexist monster symbol is that of the hag. The hag's physical description, which includes moles, frayed hair, and blotchy skin, seems to be pulled from descriptions used during the era of witch hunts (Stang & Trammell, 2020). Further, hags represent the fear and hostility toward the aging female body (Stang & Trammell, 2020).

Blackness being equated with evil is also something that was prevalent in the early days of *D&D* (Di Placido, 2020; Limbong, 2020). The most notable example of blackness being equated with evil is the drow. Originally taken from Norse mythology, the drow were intended to be a race of dark, evil elves. The mythology of the drow explains that they were created when their goddess Lolth betrayed the elven god Corellon (Mearls & Crawford, 2014a). As a result of her betrayal, these elves were given ebony skin and doomed to live away from the light in a realm called the Underdark, and are noted in the *Monster Manual* as being an evil race (Mearls & Crawford, 2014a). As will be discussed further, this characterization problem has been addressed recently; however, as it is still found within the officially published materials for *D&D* the problems persist.

Possible Solutions

The applied GM will want to take into account which monsters they are choosing and what unintentional messages they might be sending by selecting that monster. What is the foundational myth (if any) for the monster? Is this monster a result of cultural appropriation? Finding monsters that fit a theme, for instance creepy or slimy, might be better than trying to follow monster tropes. The more intentional one can be with choosing monsters, the less likely it will be that the monsters will communicate unintentional messages (e.g., woman as villainous, or the color black always representing evil). When using more traditional monsters, like hags or vampires, consider changing them slightly. Create a male hag or a female vampire lord. Focus on the evil actions that the creatures has done rather than their nature being what drove them to be evil. Additionally, the applied GM likely should provide pathways other than combat to solve encounters.

On dragons and other beasts: In the fifth edition of *D&D*, dragons were introduced as being either metallic or chromatic. Metallic dragons were always good while chromatic dragons were always evil. Thus, as the black dragon was chromatic, players again encountered the problem of dark equaling evil. With the publication of *Fizban's Treasury of Dragons* (Wizards RPG Team, 2021) the alignment of dragons has shifted from

always being good or evil to the phrasing of “typically good” or “typically evil.” This shift is helpful in allowing GMs to have more nuance in their stories while still getting to use such iconic creatures. One fix that this author has previously used is to have dragons get some of their power by following the wishes of the god they were born under. That is to say, some chromatic dragons could follow Bahamut, a lawful good dragon god, while others follow Tiamat, a chaotic evil dragon goddess (Mearls & Crawford, 2014a). Thus, a metallic dragon could choose to follow Bahamut and gain their full abilities as outlined in the *Monster Manual*, or perhaps they do not and therefore have different abilities than what are listed in the *Monster Manual*. Of course, this is not a perfect solution; still, it can be a starting point for other applied GMs to consider how they might address the concept of naturally born evil monsters that are prevalent in most RPGs.

ART

Fantasy art is an important element in the history and creation of this genre (Long, 2016). When creating mythical worlds having an image to show what is being represented is very helpful. Art can also help players begin to construct the gaming world in their minds. Small details, for example seeing images of fairies going around and lighting the lanterns in a city, serve to give the overall feel of a setting. The art is often the template for the world.

Heroic art of the early editions of *D&D* primarily represented heroes as being white and male. Moreover, those portrayed were typically young, in peak physical shape, had no notable disabilities, and had light-colored hair. Though much has been done to update the images of heroes so that they may represent all races and body types, most art still depicts white characters. Long (2016) found that for all of the history of *D&D* only 4% of the official art depicted people of color. Even for those hobbyists today wanting to paint their own miniatures, the skew is toward white skin tones. In the official Monsters Paint Set for *D&D*, the three skin tones are fair, ruddy, and rosy (Army Painter, 2018). If you want to make a hero with black or brown skin, the hobbyist must mix the color themselves.

In the book *Art & Arcana: A Visual History*, the first image of a person of color does not appear until page 111 (Witwer et al., 2018). That image though is of Lolth, the chaotic evil spider queen goddess of the drow. Further, much of the art depicting women portrays them as sex objects rather than true fighters and warriors. In the documentary *Eye of the Beholder* (2019) it was noted that the artist Clyde Caldwell typically would take on all of the art projects that were to depict women (Slagle & Stillman, 2019). In the film Caldwell noted that he likes

to paint sexy ladies, and saw no need to ensure female fighters were portrayed wearing armor or protective coverings (Slagle & Stillman, 2019). While some women found such depictions to be empowering, others felt like it communicated that they did not have a place in the fantasy world of *D&D* (Slagle & Stillman, 2019).

In reviewing the art in *Art & Arcana*, there do not seem to be illustrations that depict people with disabilities of any kind (Witwer et al., 2018). Though older individuals are depicted, typically these take the form of aged wizards. Changes have been made in more recent works, which will be discussed later in the chapter.

Representation matters. Having representations of characters that one can identify with can aid in improving self-esteem, but only if such depictions are empowering and not engaging in negative stereotypes (Long, 2016; Trammell, 2018). While representation has improved, it is by no means equitable. A 2004 study by Glascock and Preston-Schreck reviewed representation of people of color and women in newspaper comics. After reviewing a month's worth of issues they noted that women and people of color were underrepresented, and when they were depicted often it was done either in a stereotypical manner or as a background character (Glascock & Preston-Schreck, 2004). So, while representation has increased, often it is representation that is reinforcing negative stereotypes, and such images can cause harm (Glascock & Preston-Schreck, 2004).

Possible Solutions

For the applied GM using art pieces can be very helpful to demonstrate the feel of the world the characters exist in. Being aware of how people are portrayed in any art that is used is important. Are all the figures white? Are they all male? Do they have just one body type? Thinking through what one wants to do with the art can be helpful. Also, if players are bringing in art to share their character concept, it might be better to encourage them to make their own concept using a tool like Hero Forge (an online character designer), rather than bringing in preexisting art.

CAMPAIGN SETTINGS

One of the fun aspects of playing RPGs is getting to imagine your character in a fantastical setting, whether that be a beloved intellectual property or a world completely of your own design. In an effort to create more settings for *Advanced D&D* an official book was released entitled *Oriental Adventures* (Gygax et al., 1985). This book was not written by anyone from the portrayed culture. The book has been widely criticized for its stereotypical portrayals of Asian culture. Unfortunately, this problematic portrayal was not unique.

In 1992 Wizards of the Coast released the *Arabian Adventures: Al-Qadim*. It was a campaign setting designed to have an *Arabian Nights* feel (Grubb and Hayday, 1992). This setting leans into the use of stereotypes and exemplifies outsiders writing about a culture, rather than working with someone from within the culture.

Though both modules are still available through the Dungeon Masters Guild, Wizards of the Coast has included a disclaimer noting that these works portray ethnic, racial, and gender prejudices that were common at the time of its publication, they also note that such portrayals were wrong then and are wrong today (Gygax et al., 1985).

More recently Wizards of the Coast came under scrutiny for their portrayal of Indigenous people in their *Tomb of Annihilation* module, and for the depiction of the Vistani people, as thinly veiled stand-ins for the Romani people, in the *Curse of Strad* campaign module (King, 2021; Marshall, 2020). Wizards of the Coast has addressed these concerns in reprintings of these texts, utilizing cultural consultants who are members of the portrayed cultures. It is concerning though that the tendency toward stereotypes and cultural appropriation still seems to persist.

Possible Solutions

For the applied GM being intentional about the setting is often highly important. If the players want to play in a setting that might bring in stereotypical themes, such as the Wild West or the Crusades, the applied GM will want to be deliberate about whether/how to use parts of the themes that players are interested in without bringing forward stereotypes. Consulting with others can help with world building.

There are also campaign settings that are written by those within the culture, like *The Islands of Sina Una* or the *Wagadu Chronicles* for *D&D 5e* to name a couple. When engaging in world building, the applied GM does not need to

create everything from scratch. There are many settings available to create a rich and diverse world.

> When looking for source material to increase cultural diversity in the game, be sure to investigate who the consultants were for the work. If the work was designed to represent a non-Western culture, ensure that people from within the culture were, at the very least, consultants on the project. Ideally those from within the culture should be writing and creating materials. *The Islands of Sina Una* (Versprille, 2021) and *Wagadu Chronicles* (forthcoming) are two examples of books that are written by those from within the culture being represented.

RECENT EVENTS AND ISSUES

It can be tempting to imagine that problematic themes and elements are remnants of the past for RPGs; however, that is not the case. As recently as 2017, Wizards of the Coast put out their *Tomb of Annihilation* adventure, which contained troubling elements (Perkins et al., 2017). Further in the greater gaming community, women, trans, and nonbinary individuals often do not feel welcomed or included into gaming spaces. During a panel discussing women's issues in games, one panelist, Angela Locashio, noted that she felt more comfortable walking into sex stores than walking into a gaming store (Geek Therapeutics, 2021). The following discussion is to provide a broad overview of concerns in the greater RPG community related to LGBTQIA, gender-related issues, race-related issues, and issues related to physical disabilities. Notably the section on issues related to gender is longer. This is not to say that this issue is more important; it is simply a more well researched and established topic.

LGBTQIA-RELATED ISSUES

Issues of Gender Expression

For the purposes of this chapter gender expression refers to how an individual perceives and presents themselves within the gendered guidelines of their culture. Traditionally, RPGs only represented male and female character options. Until recently there was no representation for the transgendered community in official *D&D* content. With the publication of *Mordenkainen's Tome of Foes*

(Wizards RPG Team, 2018) the concept of gender fluidity was introduced into *D&D*. Elves are now able to change their gender expression within the game without changing anything else about their character (Wizards RPG Team, 2018). Since the change in 2018, more gender fluidity has been included within the games. There are now some nonbinary and transgendered NPCs in some of the official campaign modules from Wizards of the Coast (2018). While these steps are small and do not make up for decades of being ignored, the movement is in a positive direction.

It is recommended that applied GMs be willing to take gender fluidity a step further and allow for PCs, and even NPCs, to be able to change their gender expression as desired. RPGs can offer players the opportunity to play with different forms of identity or world experiences. The more accepting the applied GM is to letting players adjust how their character presents themselves, the better. Using name plates that allow the player to show their personal pronouns as well as the pronouns of their character is a simple way for applied GMs to ensure players feel welcomed in making such adjustments.

Queer Representation

Much like gender representation, relationships within *D&D* typically followed heterosexual standards. While there was nothing stopping a PC from being queer, there was no queer representation within official campaign modules. This too has changed in recent releases from Wizards of the Coast. In the sourcebook *Tasha's Cauldron of Everything*, a gay couple is shown in one of the art pieces (Crawford, 2020).

It is worth saying again that representation matters. Sihvonen and Stenros (2019) discussed the history of queer representation in RPGs and reported that while one can find queer representation going back to the 1970s, it has only become commonplace more recently. Showing individuals that they have a place in the world is critical to helping individuals feel seen and as though they belong, which helps to create more feelings of self-worth.

Possible Solutions

For the applied GM, it is important to create NPCs that show differences. Having tall, short, skinny, overweight, disabled, and queer NPCs in the world is important. Think through what pronouns an NPC will use and how their

pronouns are communicated. Recall that in a fantasy world, even one that resembles our world, there does not need to be the same fears and prejudices as are seen in our day-to-day world. Encourage players to imagine what a world where being nonbinary was the norm might look like and how that might influence the culture of that world.

GENDER-RELATED ISSUES[1]

Sexism is found all over America—in the books children read, in the teachings of organizations like the Boy and Girl Scouts, and even in gaming (Denny, 2011; Garner & Grazian, 2016; Harvey & Fisher, 2016; Kirkpatrick, 2017; McCabe et al., 2011; Nephew, 2006; Schut, 2006; Taylor, 2003; Trammell, 2014). When *D&D* was first created, war games were seen as the realm of men (Peterson, 2012, 2104). Women who were interested in war games were thought to be an exception (Peterson, 2012). Even though women were an integral part of getting the first edition of *D&D* published, the product was marketed toward and designed to appeal to men and boys. As noted by Peterson (2012, 2014), Gygax said that he would make the game more inclusive as soon as a woman bought a copy.

In the October 1976 issue of *The Dragon* magazine, Lakofka wrote an article titled “Notes on Women & Magic—Bringing the Distaff Gamer into D&D.” In the article, Lakofka noted that woman PCs could exist in *D&D* though they would be inferior fighters, and that their charisma score would be replaced with a beauty score. Lakofka also advised that women PCs be given special abilities based upon their beauty, which would allow them to seduce male characters (1976). In a 1977 article from *The Dragon* magazine, Crabaugh noted that when creating a female PC, she would always be weaker and unable to ever be as strong as a male PC. In a 1980 article, Holmes, a working physician, discussed his own *D&D* games with adolescents in which he allowed a male character to roll dice to see if his character was successful at talking a female PC into having sex, even though the female PC’s player stated she did not wish for that to happen. Thus, even when a game was facilitated by a highly educated professional, the female players at the table were not allowed to enact their own boundaries. The early messaging was clear: women were welcome to play, only as long as their characters were not as physically powerful as male characters and as long as they played attractive female characters (Bowman et al., 2020).

There has been notable research and writing about how women are treated in the wider gaming spaces. While much of this research is focused on video games and the wider cultural treatment of women, much of the findings likely can be extrapolated to indicate how women may be treated in the RPG community. The gaming world has not always been the most welcoming space for women. In 2014 there was an incident referred to as gamer gate or #gamergate. The incident was fronted as being about integrity in journalism, yet much of what was said seemed to be more focused on keeping contemporary gaming culture an exclusively masculine space (Dowling et al., 2020). The events around the gamer gate incident in 2014 helped to illustrate the hostility that some women nonbinary and trans individuals have faced in the larger gaming community (Dowling et al., 2020).

Gamer gate was not the first such incident that women encountered. An article by Salter and Blodgett (2012) examined the reactions around a webcomic produced by *Penny Arcade*. In the comic an offhand, and off-color, joke was made about NPCs in video games being left to be ravaged by dickwolves (Salter & Blodgett, 2012). The creators of the comic enjoyed this joke and had T-shirts made that were to be sold at the Penny Arcade Expo, or PAX. Survivors of sexual assault found the shirts to be offensive and noted that the fans who supported the shirts the most tended to engage in more sexually harassing behaviors (Salter & Blodgett, 2012). The comic's creators were in support of the T-shirts and there was a notable division in the community as a result.

Sexism tends to be a reality that many women face in their daily lives. Joyce et al. (2021) reviewed how everyday sexism impacts women. In their study Joyce et al. (2021) defined everyday sexism to be behaviors such as using feminine terms as a form of insult, or when a man with less experience than a woman tries to teach her or tell her about her own area of expertise. Joyce et al. (2021) used Reagel's (2016) definition of mansplaining, which is also consistent with Ungvarksy's (2021) definition, as being the act of explaining something to someone in a patronizing and condescending manner. The concept of mansplaining is taken a step further by Dashiell (2020) discussing gamesplaining, where men explained the rules of a game to women who already know and are familiar with the rules. Joyce et al. (2021) also commented on how historically the work and contributions of women tends to be ignored and that men often talk to women in patronizing ways. Joyce et al. (2021) noted that the women in the interactions they observed had brought attention to these behaviors. Though one would hope that in more professional settings such

sexism would not be observed, sadly this does not seem to be the case.

A 2011 article by Rhoton examined gendered barriers to women's advancement in STEM-related fields. In an effort to understand the difference in gender representation in STEM, Rhoton (2011) examined biases. Rhoton's research confirmed that men working in the sciences tend to exclude female colleagues and devalue the scholarship of female scientists. Further Rhoton (2011) found that women in the sciences tended to avoid engaging in overtly feminine practices, as a way to avoid drawing attention. Thus, it appears women actively engage in supporting the biases that undermine their own placement in the sciences. Additionally, men and women in the sciences view gender discrimination as being typical, and thus do not speak up against it (Rhoton, 2011). In interviews of women in STEM fields, Rhoton (2011) noted that women tend to view more traditionally feminine behavior, including giggling, as being unprofessional, and would try to distance themselves from women who act traditionally feminine. As noted by Myers (2004) feminine traits are overwhelmingly devalued by society. Even women often are demeaning and dismissive of femininity. One reason for such dismissiveness might have to do with the queen bee phenomenon.

The *queen bee phenomenon* is seen as the need to be the one and only leader in a group. The queen bee will typically undermine and be hostile toward other women (Sterk et al., 2018). Queen bee behaviors seem to be learned and derived from the assumption that there is a finite ability for women to be in leadership positions (Sterk et al., 2018). One cure for such behaviors is to increase the number of women in a space. If there are only a few women, that seems to spark the idea that there are a finite number of spaces "allowed" for women; whereas if there are more women in a group, each woman stops seeing her position as being one of scarcity (Sterk et al., 2018). Such findings indicate that when running groups for all genders, applied GMs should ensure that players do not feel like their position is tenuous due to finite resources.

How girls and women are treated by other gamers varies depending on how skilled male gamers perceive themselves. Kasumovic and Kuznekoff (2015) wanted to understand what factors might be causing male hostility toward female video game players. Using voice recordings of video game players' interactions, the authors sought to understand how skilled or unskilled a player was and how they interacted with other players (Kasumovic & Kuznekoff, 2015). Their findings showed that less skilled male players overall treated female players of all skill levels with hostility, though they treated less skilled

female players the worst (Kasumovic & Kuznekoff, 2015). Meanwhile, less skilled male players tended to treat more skilled male players in a more submissive manner (Kasumovic & Kuznekoff, 2015). Skilled male players treated all female players, no matter their skill level, well and were more welcoming and open to playing with them (Kasumovic & Kuznekoff, 2015). The authors believed the facilitating factor was security in one's status; the more secure a player felt in their skill and reception within the gaming community, the less threatened they were by female players (Kasumovic & Kuznekoff, 2015). Unskilled players, on the other hand, were threatened by female players of all skill levels as they were not confident in their status in the gaming community (Kasumovic & Kuznekoff, 2015). Though how male players treat female players in online video game settings does not likely directly compare to how female players are treated at in-person gaming tables, there is likely some spillover of these effects. Thus, it might be expected that at gaming tables, male players who are not as sure of themselves within the game will probably treat female players of all skill levels with some hostility, while skilled and/or experienced male players will be more open and accepting of players of all genders.

Hostility toward women and girls persists even in an all-text setting as was shown in an article printed in 2000 by Kendall. In the study, Kendall (2000) examined interactions in a text-only online game. Kendall (2000) noted that when women were mentioned or were active on the chat boards, there were often degradative terms used to imply that the women were only useful as sexual objects. In the review, Kendall (2000) wrote that the men in the chat forums she reviewed would call themselves nice guys, yet most expressed homophobic ideas and engaged in sexist talk that objectified women and indicated the forum was an unwelcoming atmosphere for any who were not heterosexual white men.

Possible Solutions

The above research studies all seem to point to men generally having a hostile attitude toward women in the greater gaming spaces. Applied GMs will want to consider how to handle such ingrained behaviors for their own gaming spaces. Thinking through how hostility and dismissiveness will be addressed before starting applied gaming groups is important as the research indicates such behaviors are likely to occur.

RACE-RELATED ISSUES

Race can be a challenging subject in RPGs. For most gaming systems, race indicates the species of a character within the gaming world (e.g., elf, dwarf, rabbit-folk, etc.). Though the races in most RPGs are not from our modern earth, and therefore should not be impacted by how things are in the culture of the players, that is not what is typically seen. Often different fantasy races have become stand-ins for how real-world cultures and races are treated and viewed. How underrepresented groups are treated in games generally is reflective of how they are treated in our world. Perhaps one of the most illustrative examples of this is how orcs have been depicted.

J. R. R. Tolkien is credited with creating our modern perception of what an orc is. He loosely based his orcs off his understanding of Mongols (Rearick, 2004). Thus, he made them a nomadic destructive force. As orcs were pulled into *D&D*, they were noted as being a chaotically evil race. They were not very intelligent, were brutally violent, and would always fight to the death (Di Placido, 2020; Wizards of the Coast, 2020; Young 2016). This idea of orc culture was pulled forward all the way into the fifth edition. As time progressed more and more African influence found its way into the aesthetic of orcs. Those in the community have talked about how the look of orcs has been more and more Africanized over the last several decades (Young, 2016).

Fixes have been proposed. An unofficial publication by E. Marshall and G. Marshall (2020) recommended creating cultural backgrounds in fantasy games rather than relying on biology to be the predictive force for a PC. In the book Marshall and Marshall proposed using a character's upbringing to impact their gaming stats rather than their DNA. Wizards of the Coast has also made changes noting that all creatures that were described as being humanoid no longer have their alignment depicted (Wizards of the Coast Team, 2021). Previously races such as orcs and drow were noted to always be evil, even when they could be chosen as a playable race. If the player wanted their alignment to be different, it would have been notably odd within the world of the game. Now alignment is completely up to the player to decide (Wizards of the Coast Team, 2021). Further, under the new character creation guidelines from *Mordenkainen Presents: Monsters of the Multiverse* (2021), PC ability scores are no longer set by the species of their character, the player gets to choose what ability scores to improve (Wizards of the Coast Team, 2021).

Possible Solutions

The applied GM will want to think about how the various races act and interact in the gaming world, and how they will communicate this information to their players. Additionally, applied GMs will want to consider how to handle situations should players start to act insensitively or engage in cultural appropriation. Applied GMs will want to be thoughtful in how they depict the NPCs of the world to help ensure they are not participating in cultural appropriation. They should also review their own work to ensure that they are not bringing harmful tropes and stereotypes into their game. As noted by DePass (2019), including harmful tropes can be incredibly alienating for players.

PHYSICAL DISABILITY–RELATED ISSUES

Those with physical disabilities have been greatly ignored by most mainstream RPGs until recently. In all of *Art & Arcana* (Witwer et al., 2018) there are no images of a hero or any other person with a visible disability. There are also those in the disabled community who take umbrage with *D&D*'s use of the terms "blinded" and "deafened" as the names of undesirable conditions (statuses that negatively impact a PC) (Mearls & Crawford, 2014b). Changes are being made; popular *D&D* streams, in particular *Critical Role,* have featured PCs and NPCs with notable physical disabilities. There are also miniature figurines that feature characters using battle chairs to represent the use of a wheelchair in the gaming world.

Possible Solutions

Applied GMs need to consider how they might include PCs or NPCs that are living with physical disabilities. They also might want to consider if they will have NPCs that have different psychological conditions. The hope of including such NPCs would be to decrease stigma and help players see others living, and possibly thriving, with different challenges in their lives.

CONCLUSION

One would think that in fantasy worlds there would be fewer issues than in our

mundane reality. Unfortunately the creators of fantasy worlds often bring in their own biases. As more players have been engaging in RPGs, more cultures and traditions are being discussed within the worlds of the games. Though the RPG gaming world is far from perfect, the greater gaming culture has shown a willingness to adapt and change to ensure that products are more inclusive. The aim of this chapter has been to illuminate some of the foundational problems within fantasy RPGs so that applied GMs can help to ensure that they do not carry forward some of the problematic themes of the past.

1 Much of the following likely can be globalized to trans and nonbinary individuals, but the research historically has focused on issues related to a binary gender paradigm. Thus the research has looked at data using terms such as male and female. This is not to say the following cannot also apply to other genders, just that the research reviewed did not look at gender expression beyond gender assigned at birth.

11

Ethics

To any licensed provider ethics are an important consideration. When reviewing the code of ethics for psychologists, social workers, and counselors, there are some common themes that apply to all therapy groups that any provider running applied RPGs—referred to here as an "applied RPG provider"—should think through and ensure that they address.

The chapter is designed to help the applied RPG provider consider the ethical issues of their group. It is advisable that anyone preparing to run an applied RPG record how they are going to address the ethical issues listed below. Documentation is one of the most important aspects of demonstrating ethical decision-making.

When planning out applied RPG groups, every provider would be well advised to create a document in which they explain their rationale for using applied RPGs over other forms of therapy, what their training is, their justification for using the selected gaming system, and so on. Demonstrating one's thought process for using an intervention can go a long way in aiding a provider should there be an ethical complaint. The following can be used as guidelines for what points to discuss and include in such a document.

DEVELOPING INTERVENTIONS

As of the writing of this book, applied RPGs have not had sufficient research done to demonstrate their effectiveness for any specific diagnosis or age group. Additionally, as this intervention is relatively new, there are potential perils that might not yet be well understood. As is noted in *Ethics in Plain English*, the cutting edge of interventions cuts both ways (Nagy, 2005). One must understand

that when using a new tool, there can be unexpected and unintended outcomes (American Counseling Organization, 2014; American Psychological Association, 2016; National Association of Social Workers, 2017).

While the applied use of RPGs has not yet been established from research on its own, as was discussed earlier in this volume, there is foundational research from other fields that likely is pertinent to the applied use of RPGs. Any provider who uses or wants to use applied RPGs should have at least a passing familiarity with the principles that drive other forms of therapy, which can influence applied RPGs. Any such provider also will want to discuss how they utilize the skills that they have already with the new skills of applied gaming. Such documentation can help to demonstrate intent and understanding of a developing field.

It is also important that a provider who wants to become an applied RPG provider keeps up to date with research in the field (American Counseling Organization, 2014; American Psychological Association, 2016; National Association of Social Workers, 2017). Though little research has been published on the applied use of RPGs, there are studies that are ongoing and which will likely be published within the next 5 years. As findings are presented, it is important to know what the studies looked at and what the findings were. Applied RPG providers would be advised to plan to do an annual literature review to keep apprised of developments in the field.

When utilizing a new intervention, a provider needs to keep in mind that they might have to change how they practice the intervention as the field progresses. What is recommended in these pages at the first printing may no longer be true in 5 or 10 years. Providers engaging in new practices understand that adaptation and adjustment are part of engaging in a developing field.

PROPER TRAINING

As with any therapeutic intervention, the provider needs proper training in that intervention (American Counseling Organization, 2014; American Psychological Association, 2016; National Association of Social Workers, 2017). Ideally training would include didactic learning along with supervised experiences. Outside of being able to attend such a training, it can be useful for the applied RPG provider to work with a peer consultation group. The provider will want to document their training, supervision, and consultation hours. When seeking

supervision, it is also important for the supervisee to ensure that their supervisor is also following ethical guidelines (Cimino et al., 2013).

Once one has received training in an intervention it is expected that they will continue to seek out continuing education in that intervention to ensure they refine and further develop their skills (American Counseling Organization, 2014; American Psychological Association, 2016; National Association of Social Workers, 2017). It is reasonable to expect that a provider would seek out continuing education every 1 to 3 years. If there are no new or developing trainings that a provider can take, or which do not feature the client population the applied RPG provideris working with, they might wish to consider offering a training themselves.

EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICES

When working with clients, providers have an ethical obligation to provide services that are shown to be beneficial (American Counseling Organization, 2014; American Psychological Association, 2016; National Association of Social Workers, 2017). When using a new modality following this guidance can be difficult as there is not yet a strong empirical foundation. One of the benefits to applied RPGs is the ability for the provider to weave in evidence-based practices into the sessions. Providers can demonstrate that skills and interventions that have a strong evidence practice can be learned and taught though RPGs. As research is done on the applied use of RPGs, providers will have stronger support for their individual methods. Although applied RPG providers can integrate evidence-based practices into their applied games, they cannot call these games evidence based or advertise their groups as being evidence based.

One thing to consider when discussing scope of practice is an applied RPG provider’s ability to serve as the GM for the sessions. Although there are no standards to indicate one’s expertise with running a gaming system, it is imperative that an applied RPG provider know and be competent with running the game that they have chosen for their applied game. It would be advisable that the provider have experience running casual games for friends or colleagues before they start running applied games as a form of therapy. Documentation of this experience can be helpful for applied RPG providers. If the applied RPG provider chooses to have a technician act as the applied GM, the provider will

want to at least have a passing understanding of the gaming systems and rules so that their supervision of the group and the applied GM are sufficient for their licensing board's ethical standards.

PRACTICING WITHIN THE SCOPE OF LICENSE AND TRAINING

Most licensing boards stipulate that providers practice within the scope of their license. Understanding what that means for a provider's individual license is important (American Counseling Organization, 2014; American Psychological Association, 2016; National Association of Social Workers, 2017). Providers need to engage in continuing education and read up-to-date literature on the intervention methods that they utilize.

One thing to consider when discussing scope of practice is the applied GM's ability to be a GM. Although there are no standards to indicate one's expertise with running a gaming system, it is imperative that a GM know and be competent with running the game that they have chosen for their applied game. It would be advisable that the GM have experience running casual games for friends or colleagues before they start running applied games. Documentation of this experience can be helpful for applied GMs.

HIPAA

Before talking about confidentiality requirements that are relevant to the use of RPG's as therapy, including professional codes of ethics, it is important to mention the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act. Pub. L. No. 104-191, § 264, 110 Stat.1936 (HIPAA). HIPAA is a federal law that requires that healthcare providers "maintain reasonable and appropriate administrative, technical, and physical safeguards" to protect what the law refers to as their clients' electronic "protected health information," or "e-PHI."

"Protected health information" is information, including demographic data, that (i) relates to (1) a person's past, present or future physical or mental health or condition, (2) the provision of health care to a person, or (3) the past, present, or future payment for the provision of health care to a person, and (ii) identifies the person or reasonably can be used to identify a person, including, without limitation, name, address, birth date, or Social Security Number (What Is PHI?,

2021). It applies to any “covered entity,” which is any health care provider or anyone else that electronically transmits any PHI for which HHS has adopted standards, which, generally, means in connection with billing and payment for services or insurance coverage (Office for Civil Rights [OCR], 2021). Any applied RPG provider that falls into this category must comply with HIPAA as well as with any codes of professional responsibility. While the HIPAA statute does not specify the particular technology that covered entities must have to meet their HIPAA obligations, it requires that they use the “technical, hardware, and software infrastructure necessary to protect e-PHI (Office for Civil Rights [OCR], 2021b),” “maintain continuous, reasonable, and appropriate security protections (Office for Civil Rights [OCR], 2021b),” and document what measures they have taken (Office for Civil Rights [OCR], 2021b). See also Department of Health and Human Services, HIPAA for Professionals, Summary of the HIPAA Security Rule (https://www.hhs.gov/hipaa/for-professionals/security/laws-regulations/index.html).

If a provider is a “covered entity” subject to HIPAA and the provider wants to use another company to help carry out their healthcare activities and functions, that other company is a “business associate” for HIPAA purposes, and in order to use the services of that business associate, the provider must have a written business associate agreement or other arrangement that establishes specifically what the business associate has been engaged to do and requires the business associate to comply with HIPAA requirements to protect the privacy and security of your patients’ PHI (Office for Civil Rights [OCR], 2021).

HIPAA is implicated in connection with at least two potential aspects of providing therapeutic applied RPG’s: the retention and storage of patient documents, such as consent forms, and the use of gaming platforms to conduct RPG’s online if the conduct of those RPG’s will or may involve the disclosure of the participants’ PHI. In terms of document retention, this means that any applied RPG provider must be using a HIPAA-compliant EHR, of which there are many. When it comes to conducting RPG’s virtually, however, the challenge is much greater. This will be discussed below. Additionally, the provider may wish to consult an attorney who specializes in HIPAA to determine both whether the provider is subject to HIPAA and how to comply with that law.

INFORMED CONSENT AND LIMITS OF CONFIDENTIALITY

Informed consent is central for any therapeutic relationship (Mumford, 2018). When planning a group consent form for applied RPG groups, the applied RPG provider needs to consider the requirements from their professional code of ethics, any additional information needed, and how best to communicate that information to their desired client population. Likely there will be specific documents that the applied RPG provider's code of ethics requires to be included as part of any informed consent form. The applied RPG provider may also opt to include additional information on what applied gaming is, the risks and benefits, and so on. For all of these purposes, the applied RPG provider should consider consulting an attorney who specializes in healthcare informed consent and having that attorney draft all of the necessary documents.

Generating all of the needed documents before recruiting is helpful as some referral sources may wish to see the documentation before they are willing to provide referrals for applied RPG therapy. Additionally, having the documents ready before recruiting allows for the applied RPG provider to have time to make any necessary adjustments before the group meets for the first time.

In any group setting, limits of confidentiality are an important aspect of providing informed consent (American Counseling Organization, 2014; American Psychological Association, 2016; National Association of Social Workers, 2017). Like any group therapy provider, besides providing documents that lay out the information necessary for informed consent, an applied RPG provider should address with their group how confidentiality is maintained, and what expectations there are for the group in maintaining confidentiality.

When providing informed consent, the applied RPG provider will need to explain that the applied use of RPGs is still a developing field. Although the applied RPG provider does not need to outline all the research and evidence they are utilizing to inform their practice, they might wish to make it known that the clients can review some such research and evidence if they would like to do so. It might also be advisable to have the attorney who is drafting the other informed consent documents draft or review a note for potential clients discussing what topics typically are covered in the group, what the therapeutic interventions will look like, and what kind of participation the individuals will be expected to engage in.

When running groups for minors, in addition to the informed consent documents just discussed, the applied RPG provider will need to get a separate consent from a parent or legal guardian. Even in that case, though, it is advisable to have an age-appropriate informed consent form for the intended minor client

to review and sign, so that the young client understands what they are getting into when joining the group. Such an informed consent document needs to be drafted very carefully so that it does not end up being a deterrent, but rather, it sets up reasonable expectations for what the game and the therapy will entail. Again, it is recommended that you consult an attorney who specializes in this area concerning the drafting of these documents.

As was noted when discussing bleed, it is well established that playing RPGs can be a highly emotional experience. As bleed is an expected, and perhaps even desired, outcome of being a part of an applied group, the topic of bleed should be disclosed during informed consent (Balzer, 2011; Bowman, 2013; Leonard & Thurman, 2018; White et al., 2012). The applied RPG provider (together with their GM, if they have engaged one) does not need to go into detail over what emotions will be experienced, and can instead state something to the effect of "Playing RPGs can be a highly emotional experience, and while it is a game the emotions that are experienced during play are real and can be difficult for some players." Such a statement should be followed with how the applied RPG provider will help players manage difficult emotional experiences and what safety tools are being utilized in the game.

DOCUMENTATION OF SERVICES

Part of providing care is appropriate documentation of services (American Counseling Organization, 2014; American Psychological Association, 2016; National Association of Social Workers, 2017). Applied RPG providers need to document what happens in each group session to the extent that it is required by the type of group that they are providing. For educational type groups, often a general group note can be sufficient. For process orientated groups, it is important that each attendee have their own group note and a note on their individual progress.

Whichever documents are required, if the applied RPG provider is covered by HIPAA (and it is hard to imagine a licensed provider who is not), both electronic and paper records need to be transmitted and kept in a HIPAA-compliant manner. To reduce the applied RPG provider's burden of having to comply with HIPAA, it might be advisable to have players only put their character names, and not their real names or any other PHI, on game handouts such as character sheets, so that those documents do not need to be stored in a

HIPAA-compliant system. It is not clear if items such as character sheets need to be preserved with the medical record in the first place, since it is not clear whether gaming information constitutes PHI, but it is always better to err on the side of caution.

TTRPGS AS TELEHEALTH

Many groups have moved to a digital platform, in part due to the global COVID-19 pandemic that started in 2020. During the beginning of the pandemic in 2020, more gamers than ever switched to playing online, utilizing platforms such as Discord or Zoom. Applied RPG groups can also be facilitated digitally, but this raises several legal and ethical issues for the applied RPG provider.

Typically, the applied RPG provider and their applied GM, if they are using someone else to fill that role, will want to use a virtual tabletop platform to host the map, hold any handouts given to the players, and allow for video and voice participation in the game. The applied RPG provider also might want the platform to store and manage character sheets. If playing an applied RPG online is going to involve the use or disclosure of any client PHI—any information that can be used to identify the client or discuss their physical or mental conditions, including their voice or likeness—then the platform being used must be HIPAA-compliant and the applied RPG provider or other applied GM needs to have a business associate agreement with the platform operator before they can use that platform for their applied games (Hecker and Edwards, 2014).

Identifying such a platform can be a challenge. Not all videoconferencing programs that work for individual therapy support group therapy; some of the programs available for group therapy are not the easiest to use nor are all of them HIPAA-compliant; and even the videoconferencing platforms that are HIPAA-compliant are not really suited to conducting TTRPGs. Discord is a wonderful free platform that is widely used for online games, but, unfortunately, it is not HIPAA-compliant, so the company that owns it does not offer a business associate agreement. Platforms like Roll20 offer a virtual tabletop and videoconferencing all in one. But if one wants to use Roll20's video and voice feature in an applied RPG, there is no question that a business associate agreement with Roll20 is necessary, since one's video and voice, combined with information about one's mental health, would constitute PHI. However (as of the writing of this book) it is not possible to enter into a business associate

agreement with Roll20.

It is unclear at this time if any game-playing platforms exist that do not use or store PHI. Even if such platforms exist, there still may be reasons to avoid them. As noted by Hecker & Edwards, (2014) any technology that stores client information has to be HIPAA-compliant. As with many aspects of technology, the technology progresses far faster than the laws and guidelines that providers must follow, so it can be difficult to recognize what is and is not allowed.

In addition to federal HIPAA requirements, professional ethical guidelines that govern telehealth practices require the applied RPG provider to consider the privacy and security of any virtual platform that they are utilizing in therapy (American Counseling Organization, 2014; American Psychological Association, 2016; Halabuza, 2014; National Association of Social Workers, 2017). One issue that is particular to applied RPGs is whether an ethical issue arises just by virtue of a therapist and a client connecting via a platform like Fantasy Grounds, Roll20, or Steam. Even if no PHI is being disclosed, there might be concerns regarding a therapist's being in a virtual space with the client. At the time of this book's writing, it is uncertain what, if any, guidelines the various ethics boards have formulated with respect to these particular ethical issues.

The bottom line is that before an applied RPG provider sets up an applied online RPG for therapeutic purposes on a particular platform, they need to determine whether and how that platform is going to collect, store and use a clients' PHI and, if it is, they need to find out whether the platform operator will enter into a business associate agreement. If no PHI is being collected or disclosed through the playing of the RPG (as opposed to through the use of documents related to the RPG), then a business associate agreement with the platform operator is not necessary. If PHI is being collected or disclosed, the applied RPG provider should not use that platform without abusiness associate agreement. Also, if the applied RPG provider is running virtual games, they need to ensure that they are properly licensed in and following the legal and ethical guidelines for any state that their participants are in. Finally, an applied RPG provider who is using an applied GM to run the game(s) needs to make sure that that applied GM fully understands all of these requirements.

A 2018 article by Reamer examined the role of technology in therapy. In their article Reamer (2018) noted that it is important for providers to be competent on the platform that they are using and to understand the potential risks and benefits of using such platforms. The challenge comes when codes of ethics are not

written in a way that can be easily adapted to new advances in technology. Providers are often encouraged to not use technology rather than to assume risk; however, while this protects clients from possible harm, it can also create situations in which some clients are not included due to the unwillingness of providers to utilize technology. For example, a provider might not want to run virtual groups, thus limiting the ability of individuals who physically cannot travel to attend in-person groups. The digital space is ever changing and guidelines and best practices are changing as well. The applied RPG provider should keep up to date with the most relevant guidelines for their field.

MAINTAINING BOUNDARIES

Keeping professional boundaries with clients is important for any provider. Often in RPGs the players will reach out and talk with their GMs between sessions. The applied RPG provider needs to consider if they want to talk with players between games, and if so, how often and what those discussions will look like. As noted by Trimberger and Bugenhagen (2015), establishing and enforcing boundaries early is indispensable in maintaining the therapeutic relationship and ensuring that the provider does not overreach the scope of their practice.

Boundary confusion becomes more likely when the therapist fills more roles. In an applied RPG, the applied RPG provider will be filling the role of GM, therapist, group facilitator, and so on, which can lead to many opportunities for role confusion. To help confirm that boundaries, and roles are clear, the applied RPG provider should establish their boundaries from the very start of the group (Trimberger & Bugenhagen, 2015). Though discussing and reviewing boundaries does not mean that confusion will not occur, it does offer some protection should an ethical concern arise. Assuming, that is, that the applied RPG provider documented when and how boundaries were defined and discussed.

It is advisable for the applied RPG provider to directly discuss their role and remind players of what behaviors are and are not acceptable. If a boundary violation occurs, the applied RPG provider will want to address the issue as soon as possible. The applied RPG provider will also want to ensure that they have an understanding of why the violation occurred and make any corrections, if needed, to their practice.

RELEASE OF INFORMATION

As many applied RPG groups are for minors, applied RPG providers and any GMs they engage to run those groups should consider what information is confidential, what information can be released to guardians and caregivers, and how frequently such information will be released. Will information be sent to caregivers each week? Also, what information will be communicated with the provider who referred the minor player? The age of consent in the state where the applied RPG provider is practicing will determine who needs to provide such consent changes. Before any confidential information is released, the applied RPG provider will want to guarantee that they have proper, legally compliant release of information forms in place. Again, having an attorney who specializes in this area is recommended.

CONCLUSION

Ethics are a difficult and often anxiety-provoking topic. New developments and new interventions are important as the field of therapy continues to grow and develop. There are risks with providing new interventions that lack repeated randomized trials. As long as the applied GM thinks through their code of ethics, documents their decision-making process, and has other colleagues that they consult with, they are adhering to most ethical guidelines. Even when following all of the above guidance, it is advisable to consult with a legal professional to ensure that one is adhering to appropriate ethical and legal obligations.

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Session Zero and Safety Tools

Session zero has not always been utilized in RPGs. Over the past 5 years, the concept has become more widely accepted. Indeed, in the *D&D* book *Tasha's Cauldron of Everything* (Wizards RPG Team, 2020) there is even a section on running a session zero. Session zero is important as it establishes the frame of the applied RPG group. Therapists can think of session zero as the introduction to therapy. This is where informed consent is given and expectations are established. As noted in the Overview chapter, there are a number of topics to review during session zero. This chapter will go into more depth on each topic and provide examples and tools for the applied RPG provider to utilize in their games. Note, however, that in many places in this chapter and in the following chapters, we will be using the term "applied GM" to refer to an applied GM who may or may not be a licensed provider.

INFORMED CONSENT

During the first meeting of the group, the applied RPG provider (and the applied GM, if the applied RPG provider has engaged someone else to serve as GM) will want to review the limits of confidentiality and informed consent with the whole group. Ideally, each player should have already heard the informed consent during an individual meeting, and even if that did not happen, the applied RPG provider should have previously received a signed informed consent form from or on behalf of each player. Unfortunately, any player from whom the applied RPG provider has not received a signed informed consent form cannot participate even in the initial meeting. This informed consent form is a good starting point from which to explain the behavioral expectations for the group.

The applied RPG provider will want to ensure that they are using developmentally appropriate language to explain the informed consent and, if they are using someone else as an applied GM, they need to make sure that that person is using such language as well.

It is crucial for the applied RPG provider and/or the applied GM to remind players of what will happen if a topic is broached that requires confidentiality to be broken. For example, they might say, “I am a mandated reporter. This means if anyone here tells me that they are going to harm themselves or others, or they disclose child or dependent adult abuse, endangerment, or neglect, I have to report that. If such a topic does arise, we will take a pause and I will speak alone with the person who brought up the topic.” Providing such an outline helps the players understand the expectations and allows them to engage accordingly.

The applied RPG provider and their applied GM, if they have engaged one, will also want to stress the seriousness of group members keeping personal information confidential. For example, they might ay something to the effect of “Personal stories stay within the group. This means that even if you do not use someone’s name, you do not tell their story to your friends or family. Think for a moment how you would feel if you opened up to the group about something difficult and later discovered that another group member told your story to a friend, even if they did not use your name, how do you think you would feel about that? Keep that in mind, and allow each person to have ownership of their own personal story.”

It is advisable for the applied RPG provider and/or the applied GM to create and maintain a checklist of the informed consent topics that they discuss with the players. As they address each topic, they can check it off the list and note the date on the top of the form to keep a record that shows that they reviewed the requirements and limits of confidentiality and what topics were specifically addressed.

GROUP EXPECTATIONS

Following informed consent, the applied GM will want to start establishing the expectations of the group. This will include the group rules, behavioral expectations, and creating guidelines for what topics are and are not okay to address in the group setting. Following the group norms discussion, each player should have a good idea of what is expected from them during the group.

GROUP RULES

There are two primary forms of group rules for an applied RPG. First, rules for the players—specifically arriving on time and bringing needed items. Second, rules for playing the game—these are the house rules that were discussed briefly in the Overview chapter. Each will be discussed in detail below.

Player rules are the behaviors that help the players know what they are supposed to do for the group. Explicitly stating these rules helps ensure that all players know what is expected of them each session. These rules can be things like, “Please arrive on time as we will promptly start the group at 5 p.m.” Player rules are different from behavioral expectations as they are largely not dependent upon the diagnosis of the players; instead, these are the preferences or needs of the applied GM. Sample player rules could be to not talk while the GM is talking, or to only roll dice when asked to do so. A few topics that are helpful to cover alongside player rules are rules around eating and drinking, personal space, use of fidget devices, and how to express ideas (e.g., use of a talking totem or hand raising).

House rules are adjustments that the applied GM has made to the rules as written. Such adjustments can be made for the sake of making the game more fun, or for allowing therapeutic elements to be more present in the game. House rules are not a necessity for every applied RPG. It is advisable for the applied GM to consider whether they want to make any adjustments to the rules of the chosen gaming system and why such changes are desirable. If the applied GM is making several adjustments to the rules, consider providing a handout to the players noting these adjustments.

BEHAVIORAL EXPECTATIONS

Behavioral expectations are guidelines for the players that help them know what behaviors are desired within the group. Behavioral expectations will likely relate to the group goals and the client population of the group. Such expectations might be that before dismissing an idea, a player needs to state what the idea is to ensure that what was said is fully understood. Behavioral expectations might also be that players will keep their play space organized. Expectations will vary depending upon the needs of the group and client population.

There are common behavioral patterns that are seen within RPGs. The

applied GM should both be aware of these behaviors and also know how they will handle things should such behaviors arise in the group. These behavioral patterns are often spoken about as player types. The most commonly discussed player types or tropes are the rules lawyer, the power gamer, the edgelord, and the murder hobo.

The *rules lawyer* is a player who typically argues about the nuances of the rules (Cook, 2019; Dashiell, 2017). Sometimes such behaviors can be helpful; other times they are off-putting. Thinking about how to handle rule disputes from the start can ensure that rules lawyer types do not completely override the fun and enjoyment of the game.

The *power gamer* is the term used to describe players who wish for every move to be the most optimal and "best." These types of players might be angered by players who do not use the optimal spell or attack in combat, or by players who engage in role-play that, while is true to character, is not the "best" option in a situation (Cook, 2019). Planning for how to address such players is important when thinking through how to handle disagreements at the table.

An *edgelord* is a character trope in which the character tends to dress in dark clothing, be untrusting of others, and isolates from the group. Such characters tend to have a backstory in which everyone they ever loved or cared about died or betrayed them. The edgelord can come about as a result of the player not really knowing how to give their character depth. Applied GMs can help steer their players away from one-dimensional characters by having players develop certain elements, for example one or two NPCs whom the player loves and trusts (and who are alive), into their backstory.

Murder hobo is the term used to label players who just want to kill everything on sight (Cook, 2019). They see killing monsters, NPCs, and so on as their best option. GMs can plan for how to manage such players by creating situations where when things are killed, encounters become more difficult, or by having consequences within the game. Many players only have role-playing experience from video games. In many video game RPGs, if you leave a town and return later on, none of the NPCs will recall any crimes or problems that the PC had previously committed. This is not necessarily true for an RPG. There can be wanted posters or guards specifically out hunting the PCs who got on the wrong side of the law.

There are some other common behaviors observed at gaming tables that do not have designated labels. One specific behavior that applied GMs should be aware of is the tendency for male players to bring up sexual assault when there is

a female player at the table. Typically, the assault is brought up by the male players, and they may not be speaking about the female player at the table, nor about her character. Yet the topic is more likely to come up when there are mixed genders at the table. One of the ways the applied GM can prepare for this is to address what topics are allowed and not allowed within the game.

TOPICS

As noted earlier, having a list of no-go topics can be very helpful. It is advisable that the applied GM have each player anonymously complete a form, in the vein of Monte Cook's consent in gaming form (2019) before the first session. In the form, red indicates no-go topics, yellow topics are used with caution, and green topics are okay in the world. One reason for creating such a list is so the group starts off knowing which topics are acceptable or unacceptable. During session zero, the applied GM can lead the players through a discussion about additional topics that might arise during gameplay. At that point, the applied GM can lead discussions about why some topics are not allowed while others are.

Once the group has agreed upon its go and no-go topics, the applied GM will want to create a list to indicate the different subjects and where they fall for that group. This list is helpful because it allows players to see what topics may be included as well as what things they can expect in the game. Lists can be distributed as either physical or digital handouts.

Generally speaking, the applied GM will want to establish a few topics that are no-go from the start. Another option is to consider how certain charged topics are handled in their world. Recommended no-go topics include sexual assault, slavery, torture, suicide, and child exploitation. Drug use, alcohol use, and sex work are also worth keeping in mind. Do these exist in the gaming world? Can players engage meaningfully with these topics? For some groups having these topics discussed can be important; for others it can be a distraction from what they are in the group to work on.

SAFETY TOOLS

Safety tools are a required aspect of any applied RPG. *Safety tools* are agreed upon rules that can be utilized by the player or GM to pause or change the

game's narrative should the story become triggering for any participant. Safety tools were first introduced in the 1980s to mainly address adult content in gaming. They have evolved over the years, and there are now three primary safety tools that are used by most RPG players. These are lines and veils, the X-Card, and the Luxton technique. Each has aspects that are helpful; however, in their own way, each does not quite address all the needs of an applied group. Thus, for applied games it is recommend that applied GMs utilize dynamic safety tools, which are discussed further below. Please note that there is no research on any of the following safety tools. It is therefore unknown if they do indeed help players in enforcing boundaries. More research is needed.

> There should never be a negative penalty for players utilizing a safety tool. The applied GM wants to create an environment where players feel comfortable and supported in communicating and discussing their boundaries. The perceived pressure against using a safety tool likely will come from other players. This is not to say the other players are discouraging the use of safety tools. Rather, an individual might worry about upsetting their fellow players should the individual use a safety tool. Applied GMs will want to consider how to address such social pressure during their applied games.

Lines and Veils

Lines and veils were safety measures that were created in the 1980s primarily to grapple with how sex and romance was handled at the table (Reinbold, 2021). *Veils* are topics that happen "beyond the veil" that is, that occur off-screen. Veiled topics are still taking place in the world but are not seen or described during the game. *Lines* indicate firm boundaries around topics that do not occur within the world of the game. When players are listing their go and no-go topics, they are creating their lines and veils. Yellow topics are behind the veil, while red topics are lines.

Lines and veils let both players and GMs know what topics are in and out-of-bounds. One drawback of this method is that players need to think of any topics that may be personally triggering or off-putting before the start of the game. Often players do not know what topics might arise in a game or even that such topics could arise. For example, a player might not list killing baby animals as a line because they do not believe it would ever be part of the game. If while playing the game a baby animal is killed, lines and veils do not give any way for the player to communicate to the group that a personal line was just crossed. Thus, the X-Card was created to address this need.

The X-Card

The *X-Card* is a tool that is used for players to indicate when the game has broached a topic that they do not want to be in the game (Reynolds & Germain, 2019). When a player uses the X-Card, the narration stops, the scene fades to black, and the adventuring party finds themselves in a different situation. It is up to the individual GM to determine how they correct the narrative when the X-Card is used. The idea behind the X-Card is there are no consequences or questions asked of a player for using the X-Card. Please note that the X-Card is not a tool to stop bad events from happening to the character. It is a tool for the player to make known that elements they find unwelcome in the game are occurring. During digital games, the X-Card typically has a secondary card, the N-Card. This card is used to express when the narrative is getting near to a topic that is undesired. Use of an N-Card is helpful as the GM can pivot the story before it gets onto a topic that is troubling for the player.

Some players find using the X or N-Card to be difficult as it can feel like an interruption to the narrative flow of the game. There can also be a lot of perceived social pressure to not disrupt the game. GMs can decrease this pressure through demonstrating the use of the X or N-Card themselves, or by finding a way for players to subtly use the card. One criticism of the X-Card system is that it stops the narrative and pulls away from the events when what the player might want is just a slight alteration of events. To address this issue, the Luxton technique was created.

The Luxton Technique

The *Luxton technique* is a way to take the X-Card and expand upon the idea. With this technique, the player pauses the game and communicates to the group why they paused and what they would like to see happen in the narrative (Sheldon, 2019). For example, if a child was in danger, a player might pause the game and say, “It is important for me as a player that our characters save this child.” This method of communication can help players learn to process and discuss their own needs and challenges while also learning how to advocate for themselves.

Of the three techniques, the Luxton technique seems the most flexible at adapting the narrative as the game is played. This technique largely requires that the GM still uses lines, veils, and the X-Card. To simplify the safety tools, a new method is proposed that clarifies how to utilize the tools in a way designed to

help players communicate their boundaries and make changes to the narrative as needed through the game. This new method is called dynamic safety tools.

Dynamic Safety Tools

In applied games, it is recommended that applied GMs use a combination of all three techniques called *dynamic safety tools*. With dynamic safety tools, players state their lines and veils using the red, yellow, green system, developed by Monte Cook, anonymously prior to session zero (Reynolds & Germain, 2019). With dynamic safety tools, rather than just an X-Card, each player is given four tokens: one showing that they are okay with the game, one to demonstrate that the game is nearing a boundary, one to ask for a pause for processing or clarification, and one to act as a full stop to the narrative. These tokens can be poker chips, cards, or other similar items. They need to be easily accessible to each player, including being intelligible given language and color considerations. They need to be distinct enough that the applied GM can recognize when they are being used, and they must be something that can be used by both the players and the applied GM.

When the applied GM pauses the game, this is a time for the group to discuss non-game-related content, such as emotions that are arising or therapy themes and techniques that might apply to what is occurring. One method to indicate a pause is to put down the GM screen. This is a pause that the GM has instituted indicating that the game is on hold while the group discusses therapeutic points.

If during the processing time new boundaries are discussed, the applied GM will update the go-no-go topics list and provide each player with an updated list. With dynamic safety tools, there is also an understanding that the applied GM might keep certain difficult elements within the narrative for therapeutic encounters. Applied GMs should only keep such topics in the game for very good reasons, and should talk with their players about how to communicate if things are too difficult for them.

CREATING THE GAME

For some groups, during session zero the group will create the world and story that they will be exploring. This is by no means a requirement for applied games. Some modules are designed with therapeutic interventions in mind, or the

applied GM may wish to use a published module that they have added therapeutic elements to. As noted by Davis and Johns during a presentation for Game to Grow in 2018, one issue that can arise when using pregenerated modules is that the players might not feel engaged with the story, and so are more destructive in their interactions with the world rather than acting as a heroic character. For some players, such behavior is not an issue, but for others it is. A method for potentially addressing this disinterest in the game setting is to have the players assist in creating the world and the rumors that will drive the narrative. This method is called the Collaborative Home-Brew System (Game to Grow, 2018).

Collaborative Home Brew

In a *collaborative home brew* the players are involved in world building from the start. The applied GM will create a rough outline of a map, then ask each group member to add something to the map (Game to Grow, 2018). The applied GM also adds elements to the map. Once the map is sufficiently filled in, the group starts naming the places depicted (Game to Grow, 2018). Naming the elements on the map can be done in several ways. One method is to have the players propose names. Another approach is what Johns and Davis (Game to Grow, 2018) refer to as Ouija-boarding, where players shout out letters and the applied GM scrambles the letters together to create a name. Once the map is created, the group then moves on to creating a narrative about the world.

The narrative of the world starts with gossip. *Gossip* is something that is not true, it is a story and will typically start with “I heard . . .” (Game to Grow, 2018). Once the group has created some gossip about the map, the players will then create rumors about landmarks on the map. The rumors should be about a thing that is happening in a given place; it should also be stated why a person should care about that rumor (Game to Grow, 2018). Having the players state the reason to care is helpful as it tells the applied GM what they are motivated by. For example, if all of the rumors involve finding treasure, the group seems to be driven by having their characters find valuable items. If, however, they talk about the world being in danger, they are likely motivated by wanting to be heroic in the world. Once there are several rumors, the group might create more gossip or refine the most popular rumors. Ultimately, the applied GM will want the group to pick their three favorite rumors; the applied GM will use those to build the campaign (Game to Grow, 2018).

A benefit of using the Collaborative Home-Brew System is that players will naturally want to explore the world of the game to discover if the rumors they created are true (Game to Grow, 2018). Additionally, applied GMs can incorporate rumors or gossip that were not used for the primary campaign to help flesh out the rest of the world. Demonstrating to players that their ideas are within the world and giving them that moment of seeing their idea in the narrative may go far in helping players be more engaged with the game. However, this method is not required; applied GMs can also use preexisting modules or a home-brewed world.

Using Preexisting Modules

There are thousands of campaign books and modules available for a wide array of gaming systems. Applied GMs can choose to use pregenerated materials in their group. Using such materials can reduce a lot of the preparation work for the GM, and modules have all of the maps, encounters, NPCs, and so on created and ready to go. All the applied GM needs to do is read the module book, make small adjustments to implement any skills or encounters that will help with the game, and then run the module as written.

Some disadvantages are that many applied GMs report that running modules ends up being more work than home brewing would be. Also, some players might opt to read the campaign module and engage in meta-gaming as a result. Another shortcoming of using a preexisting module is that players may not want to engage with the story. And there may be some themes in the module that are not appropriate for the applied group.

When using preexisting modules, it is advisable for the applied GM to review them to verify there is no content that would be inappropriate for the group. If the setting is not influenced by content the applied GM is familiar with, it might be advisable to ask someone who is more familiar with the setting to review the module to ensure there are no problematic aspects. For example, if one wishes to use the *Islands of Sina Una* but is not acquainted with the culture depicted, it would be advisable to hire someone who is familiar with that culture to review the content and identify whether there are any problematic elements.

CHARACTER CREATION

Once the group norms are established and the world of the game agreed upon, all that is left is for the players to make their PCs. There are a few methods of character creation the applied GM can utilize. They can use premade characters that have plot hooks that tie into the world of the game. They can let the players create characters on their own, or they can work with the players to create characters. Each method has its advantages and disadvantages, which will be discussed further in the following paragraphs.

Premade Characters

Using characters that are premade, either by the applied GM or which are included in a pregenerated module, can be a helpful option for the applied GM. When characters are premade, the applied GM will be highly familiar with the characters' abilities and skills. They can also ensure that there will be encounters that are reliant upon the exact skills or story ties that each character possesses.

Premade characters that are part of a module will have been made by the authors of the module to specifically be a part of the story and to have a role in the gaming world. This will again ensure that the characters have utility in the story through their backstory or other skills and abilities. The premade character will also have a detailed backstory and personality that the player can adapt and use without having the pressure to create all of that for themselves.

There are some drawbacks to using premade characters. First, the players might not bother to read all of the backstory information, and thus miss how their character ties into the larger world. Second, as the player did not create the character, they might not be as attached to their story or their continued survival in the game. Applied GMs can overcome such challenges by helping the players find ways to make the character their own by either adding or changing elements of the backstory. They might also ask the player to develop a secret for the character that is not in the backstory. This might help the player think about the character more and allow the player to feel like the character is their own.

Player-Made Characters

With player-made characters, players are typically provided guidelines for building their character, and then are allowed to create their character so long as it falls within the guidelines. Of the three character creation methods, this one gives players the most agency over their PC. Yet there are a few drawbacks to

using such a method. One drawback is that for some gaming systems, character creation is a complicated process. For a player who is a total novice to the gaming system, making a character can be a daunting task filled with choosing ability scores, developing a personality, and creating a full backstory. Meanwhile, some players might go in the opposite direction and do too much with their character. They create a complex and involved backstory that might feel overwhelming to others who made a more simplistic backstory.

Another drawback with player-made characters is that the characters might not fit into the gaming world or not mesh well together. A player could create a character whose family was killed by a goblin horde, and another player may create a goblin. Now these two characters likely will not get along. Such issues are not insurmountable, but they certainly can create tension. There is also the possibility that the player-made character does not fit the setting at all. The game might be set against an Wild West–style backdrop, but the player made a wizard. There are a few fixes for these situations. The applied GM can provide very specific guidelines for the players to follow and also have a few backup premade characters on hand if the players do not adhere to the guidelines. The applied GM can also work with the players to create their characters.

Collaborative Characters

A balance between premade characters and player-made characters is for the applied GM to work with each player to develop a character. With such a method, the applied GM can take away the stress of having to figure out the more tedious aspects of the character; for example, naming, assigning abilities, and so on. They also can lead the player through the process by asking questions that can help the player make choices that will inform the character.

Questions can be “What species is your character?” or “Would you like to work with technology, or would you prefer more social interactions?” When helping players create characters for *D&D*, rather than asking what class the player wants their character to be, the applied GM can simply ask, “Is your player martial, a magic user, or a combination of both?” By using such questions, the applied GM can guide the character creation process while still giving the player agency over their character. With the applied GM helping the players create their characters, they can also aid the players in finding ways to weave their character into the world of the game so that, like premade characters, they can get some of the benefits of having specific utility in the

world.

One of the biggest challenges with the applied GM collaborating with character creation is that it can take up a lot of time. If the applied GM does character creation during session zero, they need to manage their time well. That way each player has sufficient time and the character creation process does not take the majority of the session. This method puts several demands on the applied GM, and might not be the most effective process for that specific group. No method is the right method of character creation; each applied GM will need to find what works best for them and the game they wish to run.

Character Bonds

One potential challenge that applied GMs might face is that the players make characters, or choose to play their characters in such a way, that the party has no reason to be working together. There is the lone-wolf character trope, which often finds its way into gaming groups. If most of the game is spent trying explain why the PCs would be in a party together, it can be difficult for much exploration of the story to take place.

A way to decrease such occurrences is to have the characters create bonds with one another during character creation. Tables exist where you roll a dice to determine how one character knows another. Likewise, you can have the players decide on these bonds for themselves. One benefit of using tables is they create a seed of an idea that players can build upon. For example, perhaps the players roll a die that, according to the table, means they are cousins. Next one player has an idea saying, “Oh, and my mom sent me out after you left to go adventuring, and she told me to keep you safe!” This method can answer the question of “why are we even together as a party?” before the first full session. This step is optional though, and is simply a technique to help prevent players from playing lone-wolf type characters.

> If one is daunted by the prospect of collaborating with players to make PCs that are realistic and have depth, there are many resources. Author James D’Amato has a book, *The Ultimate RPG Character Backstory Guide* (2018), that can be helpful. Looking into character creation guides for authors or screen writers can be of benefit as well. Another resource can be to help players ensure that their characters have at least five connections to the gaming world. These connections can be items that the characters want to find, NPCs that they care about, or even locations that they have an attachment to. Creating such ties helps the characters have more depth to their personality.

EXAMPLE

Looking back at the example group, I will walk through all of the above activities for a session zero. This group's session zero lasted for 120 minutes. Each step previously discussed will be annotated, showing approximately how much time it should take to complete. Prior to the group starting, the applied GM sent an anonymous form that the players completed with topics they did not want to see in the game; the applied GM compiled the list of these topics before the start of the game.

- The group met and introductions were made. Each player provided their name and previous gaming experience (5 minutes).
- The group members were: Julie age 16, diagnosed with social anxiety; Cara, age 14, diagnosed with anxiety and ASD; Maura, age 15, diagnosed with anxiety and ADHD; and Olivia, age 17, diagnosed with social anxiety.
- Following introductions, the applied GM reviews the limits of confidentiality and informed consent (5 minutes).

After reviewing informed consent, the applied GM told the players what they could expect out of the group. "I will come to the lobby to call you all back right at our start time, and give you all a few minutes to get set up and ask any questions. We will start our work just about 5 minutes after the hour. The group will start off with a brief discussion of anything that is pertinent to that day's game. Someone will do a recap of what we did the week before, then we will start to play. We will end the gameplay about 10 minutes before the end of group to process everything that happened and to discuss if there is anything we want to do between sessions" (1 to 2 minutes).

Next the applied GM discussed the group rules and behavioral expectations (5 minutes).

Following the behavioral expectations, the applied GM introduced the go and no-go topics for the group. The applied GM used a whiteboard to help with this list. They discussed why they are creating go and no-go topics and helped the players understand what topics can come up in games such as these (10 minutes).

Once the topic list was created, the applied GM introduced the group to the dynamic safety tools. Each player was given a dice tray that contained four

poker chips each with an image taped onto both sides. One is a smiley face, one is a red X, one is a pause button, and one is an expressionless face emoticon (😑). They discussed that at times topics might become difficult or they might feel overwhelmed. The pause token is to pause the game for a moment so the players can speak out of character, to ask questions about gaming mechanics, or to make requests for the story. The expressionless emoticon token is used to indicate that the story is getting into an uncomfortable area for the player, while the red X is to request a full stop to the game. The smiley face emoticon is to indicate that everything is okay. The applied GM added that they will review these tools at the start of all the early sessions (5 minutes).

Next the applied GM led the group through collaborative home brewing of the world (30 minutes).

Once the world was made, the applied GM provided the players with a handout on the basics of character options. The applied GM then sat with each player to help create their character. The players made the following characters: Julie created a half-elf rogue, named Adyra. Cara chose to play a dragonborn bard named Urza. Maura made a halfling barbarian named Keira, while Olivia created an aasimar cleric named Dina (30 minutes).

Following character creation, the players each introduced their characters and worked together to create connections between their characters. They used a table to give them some prompts, and then came up with their own ideas (15 minutes).

As the session came to a close, the applied GM asked each player to please review their character sheet and email the applied GM with any questions or changes they wanted to make. The applied GM also encouraged the players to draw or use a character creator to make an illustration of their characters to bring and share for next time (5 minutes).

All of this took 112 minutes, leaving 8 minutes for additional questions or for extra time if needed for one of the steps.

CONCLUSION

Session zero is important for any RPG and even more so for applied RPGs. The applied GM will want to consider what topics they will and will not cover in session zero and ensure that they have sufficient time to discuss all necessary topics. Session zero sets the tone for how the applied group will run and it is the

chance for the applied GM to establish some of the group norms. Though running this session can be a challenge, it can prevent even larger problems from developing within the game. As with any skill, the more one practices it the easier it becomes. The more applied and hobby games the applied GM runs, the easier each session zero will become.

13

Goal Setting

One of the most distinguishing features of applied RPGs is the setting of, and tracking progress toward, goals for the players. The goals that will be set for the players will be dependent upon their age, diagnosis, their current progress in therapy, and the focus of the group. Some goals may be quite simple, along the lines of increasing engagement with other players, while other goals might be more involved, such as reducing the use of apologetic phrases by at least 10% when the group meets.

This chapter will review the basic principles of goal setting in therapy, how goal setting differs in groups, and what goals are appropriate for applied RPG groups. There will also be suggestions of some standard goals that should work well alongside applied RPGs. However, it is beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss every possible goal.

GOAL SETTING IN THERAPY

Therapy needs to be based around achieving measurable goals and outcomes. While some might find this idea to be constraining, it is how the profession demonstrates that it is doing good for those it serves. Goals help to demonstrate the value and benefit of attending sessions to the players. Goals also help to keep applied groups focused and can provide a framework from which to build the narrative of the group.

Living Goals

Often when one is considering goals, the goal will be focused on reducing a

behavior or symptom. Such goals are referred to by some as “dead man’s goals” as the individual can achieve doing less of something by being dead (Harris, 2019). A *living goal* is something that the person can only achieve through actively engaging with their life (Harris, 2019).

A dead man’s goal could be to decrease symptoms of depression, while a living goal could be to go out and do an activity with friends twice a week. Living goals are focused on behaviors that are to be increased as a result of being in the therapy setting. As many therapists are more comfortable with writing a dead man’s goal, doing so can be a good starting point to help create the basis for the living goal. Thus, one might start with the dead man’s goal of “decreasing symptoms of anxiety.” To turn this into a living goal, one can consider which observable behaviors would indicate that anxiety is decreasing. For example, it may be that the individual is more talkative, or that they are more engaged in conversations around the gaming table. Taking the desired behaviors into account, the living goal might be “Player will actively participate in conversations around the gaming table.”

SMART Goals

A common acronym to describe beneficial goals is SMART. *SMART* stands for specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and time sensitive. This indicates that the goal is something that can be achieved realistically in a timely manner. The opposite of a SMART goal is a VAPID goal. *VAPID* stands for vague, amorphous, pie in the sky, irrelevant, and dissociated.

With regard to applied RPGs, a VAPID goal might be “Players will gain a sense of mastery and deep knowledge of the self by the end of the campaign.” The desire behind the goal is admirable; however, it is not achievable in 10–12 weeks of work. Changing the intent of that goal to a SMART goal might read as, “Members of the group will use I statements when faced with difficult situations at least three times over the course of a 10-week group.” The second goal is specific, easy to measure, and accounts for the time limit of the group.

Goal Setting in Group Therapy

When setting goals in a group setting, the provider needs to recall that there will be goals for both the group as a whole and for each individual player. The group goals are going to be broad. A goal for a group might be “Members of the group

will be able to articulate and practice two mindfulness skills by the end of 12 weeks." The group goal should still follow the SMART model, but it should also be broad enough to capture all the members of the group.

Individual player goals will be specific to that player's needs, yet also should align with the group goals. Thus, for a player in a group with the above stated goal, the player goal might be "Player will demonstrate appropriate use of the four-square breathing exercise without prompting when experiencing anxiety three times over the course of 12 weeks." Having player goals that are similar to the group goal makes it easier to keep the focus of the group aligned, and it also helps the applied GM keep track of behaviors. Though a player goal could be vastly different from the group goal, having a divergent goal might be more difficult for the applied GM to keep track of.

GOAL SETTING IN APPLIED RPG GROUPS

Goal setting for an applied RPG group really is no different than setting goals for any other therapy group. Goals will vary depending on the group, the client population, the group's developmental level, and the diagnoses of the group members. The difference has to do with what the objectives of an applied RPG group are and how those goals are reached. Generally speaking, there are a few broad goals that can be easily woven into most applied RPG groups, including how to work in a group setting, planning, creative problem-solving, and turn taking. Taken as stated, these goals are not SMART goals. Rather they are foundational ideas that an applied GM can use to help build a SMART goal.

In any RPG, the game tends to work best and allow for the most fun when players work together as a group. Finding how to utilize the skills of all the characters in the party to help make the group more effective can be some of the most fun that players have while playing RPGs. The applied GM can help players learn how to work together by encouraging the group to plan and strategize. Players can be asked to talk about their characters' greatest strengths as well as their biggest weaknesses. The applied GM can also have group members discuss what strengths they see in other players' characters. Helping the group identify what their characters do well and how they can build upon one another's skills can help move the group toward achieving the goal of working together.

No matter the gaming system used in an RPG, the players will come up

against a challenge. The applied GM can help the group plan for the encounters they will have. Planning can range from having the players discuss their plans for a combat encounter before the first turn in combat is taken, or working to have the players discover information to create an elaborate trap. The applied GM has powerful tools at their disposal for showing the players what happens if they do not plan, versus what happens when they do plan. Utilizing techniques such as an *after-action review* where the players discuss what went well, what did not go so well, and what they will do differently in the future can help the group learn how to use their experiences to formulate plans. Further, through role-playing, the applied GM can aid the group in learning how to clearly communicate their strategies.

Players should plan what they will have their characters do during combat encounters. The applied GM can reward a player for making a plan before the start of their turn or for knowing what they will do each turn. Encouraging planning during combat encounters helps the players to know when their turn is, to think through what they need to do each turn, and so on. Further, combat-type encounters can let players engage in creative problem-solving.

Most RPG systems utilize a setting that does not resemble the players' day-to-day lives. Being in such a different setting might help the players come up with more creative solutions to problems. Further, having unique resources—such as magic or technology—can help players think of solutions they might not otherwise consider in their day-to-day lives. The applied GM can encourage creative problem-solving by offering rewards to players who offer out of the box proposals or who try to use the tools their character has in new ways. Rewards can be giving inspiration points, magic items, or perhaps tokens that the player can use in the game. As players are rewarded for creative problem-solving, it will increase their desire to come up with inventive solutions.

RPG systems typically operate on a turn-based system for at least part of play. In most gaming systems, players primarily take turns during combat encounters. Thus, any time there is a combat encounter, the players will have to practice waiting for their turn. Turn taking and waiting can be very difficult for some. Rewarding players for doing well with waiting their turn and being patient can be a simple goal for the applied GM to have for their group.

These are general goals that can easily be used in any applied RPG group. There likely is no limit to the type of goals that one can set for an applied RPG group. Some groups may focus their goals around communication or mindfulness techniques, while others may work on conversational skills. Still

others may want to address issues related to feelings of self-esteem and self-worth. Consider the following when choosing goals for an applied RPG group: the client population, how the skills will be woven into the RPG, and how progress will be measured.

Reflect on what skills this client population most needs to work on. If the group is made up of children with learning disorders, working on reading comprehension and basic math skills might be appropriate. However, if the group is mostly composed of children on the autism spectrum, such a goal might not be the most pressing issue for that population. It can be helpful to think through two to three potential skills that the specific client population could benefit from working on. Then, from those skills, choose one that will be the primary focus of the group.

Consider how the desired focus can be woven into an applied RPG. Again, almost any skill can be brought into an RPG. Some work better than others, and some games work better than other games for this. Ideally the skill that the group will focus on should fit so seamlessly into the game that the players are not even fully aware that they are engaging with a therapeutic skill. It will just feel like a fun part of the game.

Finding an appropriate way of measuring progress can be hard for any group facilitator. A goal is only a functional goal if it can be measured and documented. For some groups, using pre- and posttests might be the most functional way to proceed. For others, it might be having the players answer reflective questions throughout the campaign. Still other groups might rely on clinician observation during play. As there is no one best game to use for applied gaming, there is no one best method for tracking progress for group members. The best measure is one that can be used fairly easily by both the applied GM and the participants.

Individual Goals

Once group goals are identified and the behavioral measure chosen, the applied GM will need to focus on goals for the individual players. One technique that can be useful is to have the players choose goals for their characters. The applied GM might or might not work with the player to identify the player goal; however, the player can have full control over selecting their character goal.

Player Goals

Individual player goals are advisable for all applied groups. Individual player goals do not necessarily need to be vastly different from the group goals, instead they can be just slightly more specific for the individual. For example, if the goal for an applied RPG group is working to help those with ADHD manage their impulsivity, an individual goal for one player might be "Client will improve ability to demonstrate attentive behavior by orienting their body toward the speaker." While for another member it might be "Client will use appropriate, quiet fidget toys while attending to group activities."

It is advisable that the goals for the players be easily observable by the applied GM. In any group therapy setting there is a lot for the facilitator to attend to. When one adds running a game to their duties, the demands on the facilitator's/applied GM's attention are exponentially increased. If possible, when running groups that utilize player goals, the applied GM should try to have a co-GM or cofacilitator. They can also have a GM run the game while they attend to the behavioral goals of the group.

Character Goals

As has been noted throughout this book, one of the great benefits of using RPGs as a therapeutic tool is the ability to use the character as a proxy. Depending upon their experience in therapy, players may be resistant to engaging with goals for themselves. However, a goal for their character can be more appealing as it is not for or about them; it is for their character. One technique that can be helpful is to work with the player to create an emotional growth point for their PC.

During character creation, the applied GM can ask the player, "How do you want to see your character grow and develop over the course of the campaign?" Such a question can help an applied GM learn where the motivations of the player are. Players might want their characters to learn how to trust, or to find a way to be accepted. When the player speaks to how they want their PC to grow, they are also providing indirect consent for the applied GM to provide in-game opportunities for that character to grow. For example, if a player notes that they would like for their PC to work on trusting others more, they are asking the applied GM to create opportunities for their character to trust either the other PCs or NPCs within the game.

When providing that player with character growth opportunities for their PC, the applied GM can discuss that they are doing so explicitly. For example, the

applied GM might have an NPC that the characters know offer to complete a vital task, and when doing so the applied GM can say, “Recall that for some of your characters they are wanting to learn how to trust others; here is an opportunity to make a decision on if you want to trust this character or not. I’m not saying that you have to, or if it is even a good idea to trust this NPC, but it is a chance for your characters to consider doing so.” By explicitly discussing the opportunity that the characters have, it can invite the players to have a discussion about what to do, and for players to reflect on whether they feel their characters are ready to change.

Though research is needed on the subject, one wonders whether the goals that players select for their characters are also the goals that the players themselves want to work on. It also seems that character goals fall in line with stages of group development. For players attending their first applied RPG group, their character often wants to learn how to trust others. At their next campaign they aim to work better in the team. At a still later group they will often have more specific goals that align with the character’s backstory and the experiences they have had in a campaign. Again, research is needed on this subject, though it appears there might be a connection between what the player needs to overcome and the growth point they choose for their character.

CONCLUSION

Goals give the applied RPG group direction and help to communicate the purpose and value of the group to other professionals. When developing goals, the applied GM needs to take into account the needs of the clients, the behaviors that they can and will measure, and what—if any—player and character goals will be used. In the next chapter I will discuss how the goals are achieved within the group through therapeutic encounters.

14

Building Therapeutic Encounters

Once the group has been gathered, goals have been set, and group norms have been established, the next step is to begin the campaign. During the course of an applied RPG campaign, the applied GM will provide opportunities for the players to practice desired skills or to use tools and techniques that they have been taught. The opportunities that are presented in the game are the therapeutic encounters. Learning how to create these opportunities is the greatest strength, and greatest challenge, for the applied GM.

GUIDELINES

When considering growth and development in an applied game, it is important for the applied GM to understand that they are not to force their players into role-playing scenarios that they are not ready for. Now, many players, and clients, are hesitant to practice behaviors that are associated with desired changes. What is key is that the applied GM not force their player to practice a skill. What they do want to do is to provide an opportunity for players to engage in the desired behavioral skills. To this end, a *therapeutic encounter* is defined as an in-game opportunity for one or more players to practice a desired skill set.

Applied GMs can create therapeutic encounters in several ways. One is to make a plot point in the game that specifically focuses on the desired skill. This might be requiring communication through a role-playing interaction with an NPC, or by practicing deep breathing to help calm emotions during a combat encounter. Crafting plot points to give players the opportunity to practice skills is perhaps the easiest method of creating therapeutic encounters. Unfortunately, it can also be rather obvious to the players what the GM is doing, and so can feel

less fun as a result.

A more difficult option is to look for opportunities within the narrative as the players are role-playing and interacting with the gaming world. Such interactions will not be as polished, yet these often are more meaningful for the group as they feel more organic. The skill required to create therapeutic encounters as opportunities arise is much greater than the skills needed to plan them for a game.

> While planned encounters can be more well thought out and polished, the players may not steer the game in the direction of the planned encounter. When this happens, it is very tempting for the applied GM to resort to *railroading*, forcing the players to the desired encounter. While there is nothing bad per se about railroading, it is often frowned upon as being less fun for the players as it can take away their feelings of agency. Furthermore, for some players any loss of agency could be triggering to their mental health conditions and might reinforce deeply held beliefs.

There are several methods that one can use to bring therapeutic encounters into an applied RPG. It is not prudent to try and list every possible method of creating therapeutic encounters. The following will seek to give the reader an understanding of the different tools and situations that can be used within an RPG to create therapeutic encounters along with examples of how to do so at the end of the chapter.

INTERACTIONS WITH NPCs AND ROLE-PLAY

Applied GMs have the opportunity to make NPCs of every kind of person and personality available. They can make NPCs that the characters like and want to interact with. They can make NPCs that the players hate and want to fight. They can make NPCs who want to help but are not very helpful. The NPC, in many ways, is the ultimate tool of the applied GM.

Through role-playing and descriptions, the applied GM can talk through a wide range of social encounters. For players on the autism spectrum, role-playing different situations with NPCs can help the players learn how to manage different social interactions and also better understand how their actions influence how they are treated. By demonstrating through role-playing and description that an NPC is getting annoyed with the PCs, the players can start to understand how their interactions may be affecting their party.

For example, a party arrived at an island with a culture the PCs were not familiar with. The PCs went out and demanded that the leader of the town give them what they wanted. The applied GM had the NPCs not help the PCs. The applied GM then talked with the group about their interactions, and the discussion helped the players understand how their actions were perceived by the NPCs. The applied GM allowed the players to have a do-over with that situation, and they were much more successful at meeting the people of the town and learning about their culture.

NPCs can also act as a stand-in for difficult people or situations that players are likely to face. An NPC might be the representation of an angry teacher or authority figure, or they can be the embodiment of an entitled person. The NPC might be someone who uses people and does not ever reciprocate. Such NPCs can be powerful tools within the applied game.

Also, having such experiences happen at the gaming table gives each player the opportunity to discuss and give guidance on how to act and interact with that NPC. The GM gets to control time within the game, so conversations between players do not need to happen in real time in the world of the game. The other players at the table can act as advisers for the player whose PC is interacting with the NPC. They can deliberate about how to work with this NPC together, and the applied GM can offer insights and guidance and remind the group of techniques or lessons that they are learning as part of the group.

When making NPCs that the players will be interacting with regularly, it is important to give them depth and nuance. Do not create a one-dimensional character that is just a punch line or that only views the world in one way. Such characters do not feel real and as such are much less useful because the players will not view them as “real people.” Give the NPC a reason for how they act; provide some history and context for their behavior. For example, there might be an NPC that is designed to embody frustrating/toxic masculine traits, like mansplaining and taking credit for the work of women. It would be easy to make such a character a punch line. However, if given depth—and more importantly, the ability to grow and develop as a character—interactions with this NPC will not only feel more realistic, they will become a more effective tool for the applied GM. If the goal of having such characters is to help the players learn how to similarly interact and engage with people in their lives, that character needs to have enough depth that they can grow and develop through their interactions with the party.

As with many of the tools discussed in this chapter there is no need for the applied GM to reinvent the wheel. Use inspiration for NPCs from works of fiction or from real people. There are also resources that have NPCs with their own backstories already created, such as Castles & Crusades NPC Almanac, Unlikely Heroes, and NPCs from gaming modules. Use these resources to help build out your gaming world. Further, utilizing NPCs that were created by others helps to ensure that the biases of the applied GM are not getting in the way of the game.

COMBAT

It might seem counterintuitive that combat can be used as a therapy tool. However, there are many ways that an applied GM can use combat as a tool. Players can be given the opportunity to plan how they will fight. They can work on understanding their character's abilities, think through what actions the enemy might take, and determine how to counter those actions.

A combat encounter that is not part of the gaming world can actually be a great way to introduce new players to the gaming system and help them better understand how to play their characters. Practice combat allows the players to make mistakes with their characters so that they can understand how their abilities work. Such an encounter is also helpful to facilitate the players' understanding of how their characters are different and how to use their various abilities together. YouTube creator Matt Colville calls such encounters the "danger room," and he has a helpful video on the subject (Colville, 2022).

Combat is a helpful tool for teaching teamwork. The applied GM can have the players work together to find ways to combine their abilities and to allow for such moves to do extra damage. Learning to work with and trust others to follow through with plans can be a big challenge for some players. Combat encounters can show how something that is deadly if faced alone can be simple to overcome with a group. Plus, the players can talk to one another about what their characters are doing and how their characters might be feeling in any given moment of the combat. Such discussions might help players with building theory of mind.

In one encounter during an applied RPG, the players were fighting a dragon. The players had figured out who their adversary was, gathered their allies together, and created a clever ambush. While the group was prepared, the fight was still difficult, but in the end they were victorious. This group consisted of girls who had all struggled with

anxiety, several were on the autism spectrum, and almost everyone had been bullied in the past. When the group won the day, they all burst into tears and hugged one another. One member was able to say, “Look at what I can do when I am with my friends.” A combat encounter brought about that moment of connection and victory for that group.

Combat also offers the players a time and place to feel powerful. Having their character cast a mighty spell, or hit an enemy with their sword can be a lot of fun. Many feel powerless in their own lives, so having a moment of feeling strong through playing their character can be a greatly meaningful experience. The bleed-out of the feeling of euphoria from the victory can be wonderful for players to experience.

Typically combat encounters are turn based. The players will know when their turn is coming up, and thus combat encounters offer a natural opportunity to practice planning and waiting for one’s turn. Applied GMs can reward players who are ready on their turn with a bonus for that turn or another incentive, perhaps giving another player the ability to reroll their dice. Rewards that give other players benefits can also incentivize the players to support and remind one another what the desired behaviors are.

Another advantage of combat is taking time as a group after to process what happened. Using an *after-action review* (AAR) allows the players to discuss what worked well, what did not work so well, and what changes they would make for future encounters. Such events help the players learn how to reflect on their actions and learn from experience. Teaching players how to reflect on their experiences and learn from their mistakes can be a valuable life lesson that can be learned through combat encounters.

Combat encounters can also let the applied GM shift expectations. Perhaps the players are attacking a gang, and rather than fighting the gang surrenders. Now the energy shifts from one of fighting to one of negotiation. Or perhaps they thought they were attacking a den of thieves, but find instead it’s the den of a bear. Teaching players how to shift their perspective can be very helpful.

Fights also give the applied GM the opportunity to demonstrate what to do with failure. Perhaps the player had an idea for how their character would do something but the dice do not cooperate. Showing how to recover from failure can be a powerful tool. As in life, not every situation will turn out as expected, combat encounters offer the opportunity to show what will happen if expectations are subverted.

When running an RPG combat encounter, it is important for the GM to keep in mind what happens if the party should lose. If the players have no risk of

losing, they will quickly learn that no matter what they do they will win; therefore, they will take combat encounters less seriously. The applied GM must think through the consequences of winning and losing for the party. It is also advisable to make sure that combat encounters have a route of escape open to the PCs. Sometimes the dice do not go their way. When this happens, and the players realize their characters are trapped in an unwinnable situation, they can feel defeated. Keeping a way to escape is essential. Note that escaping the encounter will have consequences, which might be unpleasant for the PCs, but the players have the agency to choose whether to keep their PCs fighting or retreat to fight another day. Applied GMs can help their players before combat starts by getting them to think through what their escape route would be should things not go their way. The applied GM can also coach the group on how to communicate to one another that a retreat is needed.

EXPLORATION

Exploration offers a wide range of possibilities. Exploration can help players learn to ask for and follow directions. It can be a method for them to learn how to read a map or use some basics of navigation. It can also allow for players to role-play their characters facing fears through exploring difficult environments. Exploration can also be used to help players visit and work on learning about new cultures.

Exploration allows for players to learn about the world that their characters are in and to practice navigating such a world. For example, players might enter a new town and find that they arrived on one of the town's local celebrations. This can give the players a chance to learn how to ask about the town, their traditions, and perhaps even to join in. For players on the autism spectrum, learning about local customs can help them practice how to ask questions about social traditions or social norms. This gives players the opportunity to practice several ways of asking for information during a survey of a town, letting them find out which ways work best through role-play.

Exploration is also a great way for players to practice skills such as navigation. Having the group go through a maze or dungeon is a great method of exploration. Different players likely will have particular skills that will be useful for the dungeon or maze and they can all learn how to work together to get through the challenge. When using maps, the applied GM can ask the group to

consider travel time and help them calculate how long a journey would take if they were to follow different routes. This can allow for game-world application of math skills.

Most RPGs have places that are weird or vastly different from our world. Including lands of fire, the realm of fairy, or alien planets. Exploring and discovering how strange a world is can often be a source of enjoyment for players, which helps them to engage in the world of the game. Props can be a wonderful way to set the mood of such a place through use of music, sound effects, lighting, or even scented candles. There are many tools that the applied GM can use to bring their players into the world of the game.

PUZZLES

Puzzles are an excellent way for the applied GM to give their players the chance to practice skills. Puzzles can be in the form of riddles, mazes, traps, or other devices. One may want to use a physical prop as a puzzle for the group to solve. Puzzles typically do need to be prepared before a session, but they do not have to be employed in a specific session. The applied GM can have a puzzle ready to use when the opportunity presents itself for a puzzle to appear in the story. When using a puzzle, the tools are not just about solving the problem presented; it can be how the problem is solved, what resources are used, and the emotional experience of solving the puzzle.

Having the group work together to solve a puzzle can be a great method for getting players to practice listening to one another, speaking up, and taking different viewpoints into account. These encounters can be created by each player having a piece of the puzzle, or a clue that on its own is insufficient to solve the puzzle. The group will need to work together to decide how to use each piece to find the desired solution.

Puzzles can also take the form of each player needing to do a specific task. Perhaps each PC needs to stand on a specific floor tile, or to hold down a button. Creating this type of puzzle allows GMs to have all their players be a part of the solution, even if not all of them decide to be part of the discussion.

Puzzles can also offer the opportunity for players to practice asking for help. Providing a puzzle where the players realize they only have part of the solution gives them extra motivation to engage with the plot of the story. Seeking the final piece of a puzzle can also motivate the players to learn how to have

conversations with NPCs and to ask for what they need. Whole campaigns can be focused around finding all the information needed to solve a puzzle.

The emotional experience of solving a puzzle can also provide a handy tool for the applied GM. Puzzles can be frustrating, thus giving the player the opportunity to practice self-soothing skills. When players are excited and everyone is talking at once, it can help provide players with the opportunity to practice asking for quiet.

There are many team building puzzles that can be used by the applied GM in their games. Having players figure out how to get their PCs to keep their footing on an ever-shrinking island or move a marble through a series of tubes the players are holding can help them greatly with solving puzzles, while also teaching them how to work together. When choosing a puzzle for team building consider whether it will be an activity that the players will engage in to create more of a LARP-type experience, or if it will be a narrative experience for their PCs.

> There are lots of great puzzles out there in already published games, so make it easy on yourself and use puzzles that have already been created. Find fun props to use as pieces of a puzzle, use riddle books, and logic puzzles. Keep a file with different puzzles to give your players. Kids' menus at restaurants often have simple mazes and puzzles on them; these are wonderful to use for RPGs. Yes, even with a group of adults, puzzles designed for 6- and 7-year-olds can provide an adequate challenge.

Another possibility to consider with puzzles is offering a problem with no specific solution. Have a secret entrance to a dungeon be under a statue, but do not create a way for the statue to open. Let the players come up with creative solutions, and when they come to a solution that seems to fit or like it should work, let it work. By setting puzzles that do not have specific solutions, the players get to engage in creative problem-solving and the applied GM can start to see how the players think through different obstacles, which can be helpful for developing future encounters for the game.

LEADERSHIP

RPGs build upon the skills of leadership development. Often in games, the PCs find themselves leading NPCs through challenges, such as fights, or helping them escape trying or dangerous situations. A very common story trope is for the

players to go and save an NPC. When saving the NPC, the players have the opportunity to demonstrate leaderships skills within the game.

Players are also able to practice peer leadership around the table. The applied GM can help guide the players through understanding different aspects of leadership, including how to listen and compromise, how to create a plan and communicate that plan to others, and how to engage in leadership behaviors. The applied GM can also help players take turns acting as the de facto leader of the group by enacting situations where NPCs might only willingly trust one member of the group. For example, if there is a tabaxi character, if they are working with other tabaxi, they would be more willing to trust that character over elven characters.

Players can also practice leadership skills around the table while having the support of their peers. For example, if a PC is trying to give a speech to get NPCs to help the party, there can be conversations around the table, which occur out of character, giving advice and guidance to that player. Then the player can role-play saying the suggested phrases in character. Such interactions can help players build internal scripts for helping themselves in future situations.

PSYCHOLOGICAL INTERVENTIONS

Therapeutic encounters are also places where the applied GM can teach and add specific psychological interventions. This integration can look vastly different depending upon the goals, the diagnostic presentation of the group, and the psychological modality being used by the applied GM. Some providers might take a more didactic approach, discussing a specific skill or intervention they want players to either practice themselves during the game, or have their PCs engage in. Such an approach might involve handouts, or even some more "traditional" therapeutic role-play before starting the gaming session.

An example of this might be the applied GM teaching the players a relaxation and deep breathing activity. They can also have the players use a biofeedback measure for heart rate, and give the instruction that if their heart rate goes above a certain threshold, they need to practice the breathing technique. The game then might focus on highly stressful experiences to utilize bleed-out to give the players a chance to practice the desired skill.

Other times the applied GM might create a situation where the players engage with a therapeutic encounter and the game is paused several times so that the

applied GM and players can process what is going on. This might take the form of breaking down the situation and helping the players understand how an NPC might be feeling, what they are thinking, or discussing the challenges of the situation. During such pauses, the applied RPG group will more resemble a traditional process orientated therapy group.

For example, the PCs had been asked to go and find the brother of a woman who just died to let him know what became of his sister. The group found him and quickly said, “Oh, your sister was killed in an attack on her town! Now tell us more about what is going on here.” The applied GM paused the game and worked on helping the players understand how such a blunt statement might impact that NPC. The players realized their blunder, then worked together to figure out what PCs should do to fix the situation. The game was restarted and the PCs talked more with the NPC and apologized for their bluntness.

If so desired, an applied GM might even use a standard 10–12 week CBT group and find ways to weave the lessons of each session into an RPG. Each week could have an encounter or situation that allows the PCs to learn a new skill and grow. This could be done using a school or mercenary camp setting where the players first learn and then show mastery of a skill, so they can be allowed to go on an adventure.

It might be worth noting that learning therapy skills is not always explicit to the person engaged in learning. Often, learning happens as a natural consequence of engagement with an activity or conversation, which can be just as useful or helpful as listening to a lecture on the subject. When learning occurs, it is advisable for the applied GM to take a moment and point out the changes or lessons that have happened during the game.

To those who worry that learning psychological interventions in a game will dilute the learning experience, recall the research cited earlier in this volume. Play and immersion increase engagement with situations. The more one is engaged, the more information one will recall. When humans are enjoying an activity, we are naturally more engaged and interested in what is happening. Bringing play into psychological learning is likely going to be more, not less, effective.

EXAMPLES

One of the most challenging aspects of building therapeutic encounters is

remembering that although one is giving the players an opportunity to practice a skill set, the players have the autonomy to not engage with the encounter. The more experienced an applied GM is with crafting therapeutic encounters, the easier the practice becomes. It is intertwining together stories, game elements, therapeutic interventions, and applied practices.

To start, consider a diagnosis of anxiety. A common goal might be to practice boundary setting through role-playing. The applied GM might provide opportunities for this by having an NPC that challenges boundaries or that requires firm answers in order to respect the PC and accede to the PC's desires. In combat the player might have an ability that can turn the tide of the battle for their party. The player will need to advocate for the use of their skill or ability with their peers. In exploration, the applied GM could create a situation where a player's PC would not want to continue forward to encourage the player to role-play their PC asking the party to go elsewhere. With a puzzle the player could be given special information to help solve the puzzle. For leadership, the story could involve pieces or NPCs that are tied to the PC's backstory. The possibilities are truly limitless for how to help the player work on their therapy goals.

For a player who needs to practice impulse control, there are many methods the applied GM can utilize. In role-playing there could be an NPC that has a short temper or that requires the party to engage in a lengthy conversation before they will assist with a needed item or bit of information. During fights there can be elements that are used to reward the players if they are able to take time to assess the situation before jumping in with an attack. With exploration, perhaps there are pathways that are only seen if the party takes time to fully explore an area. With puzzles the applied GM could put out pieces and reward the party for waiting before picking up the pieces. With leadership possibly the player can see what happens when choices are made without much forethought, which leads the group into difficulties.

For a player who needs to learn more about working with others, there are multiple methods that an applied GM can use to assist them in building this skill. There can be an NPC who is the key to the party accessing a needed space or item. In combat situations, the GM can create situations in which the party will do better if they cooperate. By combining exploration and puzzles, the GM can create a pathway that requires the players to work as a team to explore and successfully navigate a space, perhaps a labyrinth. This can also be a way to show players how leadership is often about delegation and how to trust those

whom tasks are assigned to.

CONCLUSION

Creating opportunities for growth is a challenge for the applied GM; however, once one starts the practice doing so becomes easier and easier. Not every therapeutic encounter will go according to plan. There will be times where the lesson the players learned, for better or worse, was not the lesson the applied GM was trying to teach. When creating therapeutic encounters, the applied GM will want to see the whole world through the lens of therapy and growth. As with any intervention, documentation is one of the key aspects of what is needed, and this will be discussed at length in the next chapter.

15

Documentation

As with any therapy intervention or group, proper documentation is important. However, when documenting an applied RPG, it can be difficult to know what should be recorded. Writing down what occurred in the story may be helpful for the applied GM, yet it would be baffling to another provider reviewing the notes. Learning how to translate what occurs in the game into clinical terms is important so that other providers can understand the benefit of applied gaming groups. It is also useful for compiling research on applied gaming. This chapter will review how to discuss events that commonly occur within applied RPG groups and provide suggestions on how to annotate such events in clinical terms.

GAMING TERMS TO CLINICAL TERMS

It is necessary to realize that proper documentation is not a way to legitimize the group or the events that occurred during the game. Instead, it is a way to translate gaming language into clinical terms. If one wants to discuss the clinical benefit of applied RPGs, it is only fitting that clinical terminology, not gaming terminology, be used. Documentation will discuss and focus on the therapeutic interventions, skills, and behaviors that were learned and/or observed during the gaming session.

With documentation a significant factor to keep in mind is who the documents are for (the audience). For process groups where insurance might be being billed or other providers are reviewing the notes, using clinical rather than gaming language is important. If too much gaming language is used, the therapeutic techniques and strategies being practiced and taught might not be observed.

For translating what occurs in the game, consider the research on bleed (emotional permeability) and the discussion of the transtheoretical model earlier in this book. Both offer a framework one can utilize to help articulate therapeutic goals. As the transtheoretical model builds upon frame theory, applied GMs can write about in-game behaviors through the lens of the four frames (player, gaming system, character, and psychological intervention).

FRAME THEORY

When players do well at swapping between different frames, this can be easily documented as "The client demonstrated skill with examining situations from multiple frames of reference." If the client is able to demonstrate cognitive understanding of a skill taught in frame four to frame one, then they can express mastery of the skill by utilizing it in frames two and three. For example, at the start of the session the applied GM taught the group how to use empathetic listening skills, so the group learned that skill in the frame of the player and the psychological intervention (frames one and four). During the course of the game, the party encountered an NPC who was very upset. They role-played their characters engaging in empathetic listening and did skill checks (they rolled the dice to see if their PCs' skills were high enough to let them effectively communicate with the NPC) based on their role-playing (frames two and three). Thus, the players learned a skill in one setting and then later demonstrated the ability to globalize that skill in other settings.

BLEED/EMOTIONAL PERMEABILITY

As noted earlier, bleed appears to be one of the primary change modalities in applied RPGs. As noted, earlier documentation around bleed can be a bit more challenging as the term is likely not well understood outside of the gaming community. When discussing bleed-out (character to player) you should focus your documentation on the functions of what occurred. For example, if the player was getting upset by events that happened with their character, the documentation might read, "The client had a strong emotional reaction to a role-play encounter. They were able to utilize deep breathing and a grounding technique to remain calm and to successfully navigate the encounter."

For bleed-in (player to character) this can be a bit more straightforward. What will be seen is the player demonstrating the lessons they have learned or discussed, as a part of the group, being role-played in character. Thus, a note discussing bleed-in might read, “Client was able to showcase appropriate use of assertiveness skills through a proxy in a role-play setting.” It is taking what is seen within the game and translating it into appropriate clinical terms.

CHARACTER ACTIONS

When documenting what happened with the character during an applied game, it might be helpful to use the term “avatar” or “proxy” rather than “character.” For instance, use the phrasing “The client successfully defined their needs through use of a proxy in a role-playing situation,” instead of “The client was able to have their character defend their (the character’s) needs during a role-playing encounter in the game.” Though the change is slight, it can help to more effectively discuss the clinical growth and events that took place around the table.

Role-playing is a common occurrence in both individual and group therapy. Therefore, it is advisable to explicitly discuss how role-playing is used in the group. For example, if a character confronts an NPC, this might be documented as “Client demonstrated mastery of assertiveness skills through role-playing a proxy during the group.”

If the player was able to recognize a social blunder their character made and worked to correct the blunder, this can be documented as “The client was able to recognize a social error that was made during a role-play. They were able to successfully utilize skills in relationship repair to minimize the potential damage to the relationship within the role-playing setting.” This helps to focus on what clinical and behavioral skills the individuals are learning rather than on gaming mechanics.

COMBAT ENCOUNTERS

When discussing combat encounters recall that such encounters rely on planning, effective use of resources, turn taking, teamwork, and creative problem-solving. In one turn of combat, a client can demonstrate all of the

above. Consider a client with ADHD, who was able to contain their excitement and wait their turn to effectively use a spell or ability to help another member of their party. Such behavior was noteworthy and evidence of psychological growth that happened through play. Documentation of such behavior might read, “Client was able to effectively wait their turn and utilize skills as part of a team to achieve mutual goals.” Again, break down the behaviors and actions of the game into easily understood clinical terms.

During a combat encounter it is not what the player does but how they go about doing it. Do they recall their character’s special abilities and utilize them for the greatest effect? If so, the player demonstrated that they know how to accurately utilize skills in a role-playing scenario. Did they do something that was suboptimal for their character in exchange for supporting another character? Then, the player demonstrated teamwork through actively supporting other members of the group during a challenge. Did they follow the plan that the group had made together? If so, then they demonstrated the ability to follow multistep instructions created with a group of peers.

Discussing the function of what a player has done during combat lets the applied GM better communicate these actions within documentation. The same tactic works for describing exploration, puzzle solving, role-playing, and so on. Look at how the players did what they did, then communicate those actions utilizing the terminology of the theoretical framework of the applied GM’s theory.

PLAYER WORKSHEETS

Another rich area for documentation comes from having the players complete journal entries or worksheets between sessions. When players are asked to reflect on their experience as a player, the experience of their character can be a powerful tool for helping the clients engage in perspective taking as well as reflecting on what lessons they learned or what experiences they gained through the gaming session. Worksheets or journaling activities can also aid the client in finding ways to globalize the skills they are learning during the group to the rest of their lives.

If clients are unwilling to journal, using check-in or check-out questions can also help to increase personal reflection on the growth and development that has occurred around the gaming table. Check-in questions might act more like

icebreakers, or they could help the players get into the mindset of the game and their characters. Check-out questions should be tailored to encourage the players to reflect on what they learned and how that applied to their non-gaming life.

EXAMPLE

To help bring all of these concepts together, consider the following session as played by the example group outlined at the beginning of this volume. During this session, the characters explored a dungeon. They started by facing a pair of riddle doors, followed by running a gauntlet. The full transcription of the interaction can be found in Appendix B. The group opened with the applied GM teaching a mindful breathing activity, then one of the players gave a recap of the previous session.

At the first encounter, Cara realized that Urza would easily be able to solve a riddle, although she was upset that she as a person was bad at riddles. Julie noted that while Urza could solve a riddle on her own, there was no reason that Cara had to do so as she could rely on all of them to help her. The group worked together to figure out a solution to the problem and had Cara role-play giving the solution.

During the next encounter, the group was shown an hourglass timer that would be used to time the trial. The group looked at their characters' hit points and noted the two characters, Dina and Urza, were the two least likely to survive the gauntlet. Julie recalled that the party had a magic item that Dina and Urza could be carried in as Adyra and Keira ran down the hall. The players started getting more and more anxious during their planning, and were reminded of the deep breathing activity. They all practiced it to help calm themselves down before proceeding. Maura had her character carry the magic item and took all the damage as she ran through the traps. Julie had Adyra take her time and was able to finish the gauntlet just in time. The session ended there.

Documentation for the group might read as thus:

During the group tonight, the participants were taught a mindfulness-based deep breathing activity. The group learned and practiced the technique at the start of the group. During the session Cara appeared discouraged and engaged in self-deprecating statements. Julie was able to validate Cara's feelings while also recognizing ways that the rest of the group could support Cara. The group was able to successfully overcome the obstacle and Cara seemed to feel much better

afterward. The group was then presented with a timed challenge. While planning how to overcome the challenge, all the participants appeared to be getting anxious. The facilitator reminded the group of the technique learned at the start of the session. Julie recalled the technique and led the other members in successfully utilizing mindful breathing to help everyone reconnect with the present moment and defuse their anxiety. The group as a whole were able to utilize their skills well to help overcome the final challenge of the evening. All seemed to be in good spirits as the group came to a close.

Individual notes might read as:

Julie demonstrated positive social interactions through validation of another group member's feelings. She was also able to understand how to utilize her character's skills well to overcome challenges. Notably, she seemed to experience positive emotions through her character achieving success.

Cara had some challenges tonight. She quickly fused with thoughts of not being good enough when presented with an obstacle. She responded favorably to other group members offering help, and was able to defuse from the unhelpful cognitions to successfully complete a needed task.

Maura was able to recognize how her character's specific skills could be the most advantageous during the session tonight. She was supportive of other players and willing to take risks when needed.

Olivia recognized how her character could be of most use during an encounter tonight. She was able to work well with other group members to assist them in finding a solution, and she was also willing to be less involved when it was clear her skill set was not as effective for a challenge.

CONCLUSION

Documentation is an important part of any therapeutic intervention. The goal of documentation is to clearly state what occurred during a group setting in a way that can be contributive to other professionals reviewing the client's history. So, while the action might have been that the player role-played bargaining with a troll to cross a bridge, the documentation focuses on how the client was able to engage in a role-play around negotiations in which they were able to clearly define their needs, understand the needs of others, and enforce their boundaries. Learning to communicate the actions around the gaming table is one of the most effective tools for the applied GM.

16

Planning and Running a Group From Start to Finish

In this section all the elements of this book will be brought together to walk through the creation and execution of an applied TTRPG group. Each section will start with a narrative description of establishing a group, then will give a checklist that providers can use as they move through each step. The following example is drawn from the author's experiences but is a blending of different clients and stories to help make the example more straightforward while still being realistic to what providers might encounter in their practice.

CONCEPTION OF AN IDEA

Running a group is not a light undertaking. An applied TTRPG group starts as any other would, with a review of the relevant literature. The first consideration is to determine whether group therapy is indicated for the targeted population. If group therapy is indicated for the population, the next consideration is what type of group therapy has been established as being effective for the targeted population and, importantly, if there are group types that are contraindicated for the targeted population. If process orientated groups are contraindicated, the targeted diagnoses likely will not be a good fit for an applied TTRPG group.

Providers also need to consider their own level of expertise with working with their target population and with running groups in general. If they do not believe their level of expertise is adequate to run a group without supervision, they will want to seek out supervision or additional training. Documenting these decisions is advisable. Providers also need to ensure that there is a sufficient

number of clients to populate their group. Running groups online is always an option. Each provider needs to determine their comfort with the technology and their ability to ensure that doing so will not violate their professional code of ethics or federal privacy laws.

An example from my own experience, I wished to create an all-girls identifying group (hereafter referred to as girls) that focused on social anxiety, self-esteem, and creating positive relationships with other girls. I wanted to have girls in middle and high school participate. From reviews of research, I knew that social anxiety and self-esteem can both be positively impacted through group work (Habigzang et al., 2013; Muris et al., 2002; Shen & Armstrong, 2008). Research demonstrates that women, and especially girls, tend to undermine one another, so I wanted to specifically create the group in order to ensure the opposite occurred (Sterk et al., 2018). I could have filled the group with clients whom I saw for individual therapy, although there are several other providers within their area who wanted to refer their clients to the group as well. As this group took place face-to-face, I followed their typical practice for group therapy in terms of documentation and record keeping.

Conception of an Idea Checklist

- Define targeted population.
- Ensure group therapy is indicated.
- Review relevant literature.
- Ensure there are sufficient referrals for a group.
- Review ethical standards to ensure compliance.

PREPARATION

Once the applied GM believes that a group would cover the issues they want to address in the group in an ethical manner, and that there are sufficient referrals to fill the group, they next need to start planning how they would run such a group. The provider will want to choose which gaming system to use; note the rationale for their choice; determine the length of the sessions; schedule the day, date, and time for the group; and decide how they will screen clients to be in the group. Providers may also choose to do meetings with potential referral sources, or

create and send out informational materials to the client population they desire to work with.

For this group I used the fifth edition of *D&D*. My reasoning for choosing this gaming system included my familiarity with the system, the popularity of *D&D*, and the access to online resources that can be utilized by members of the group. The start date was two weeks after the start of the fall term for school. The group ran for 10 weeks, taking off the week of the American Thanksgiving holiday, and allowing for one makeup date should it be needed. The time was from 5–7 p.m. I met with several people within my practice who could be referral sources to discuss the types of clients that I was looking for in this group. Through discussions with referral sources, I chose to add a second group that would run from 4–6 p.m. on a different day. Informational materials were provided for referral sources.

Preparation Checklist

- Choose a gaming system.
- Define the rationale for using this system.
- Determine logistics of the group (time of day, length of meeting, how long the group will run for, start and end dates).
- Talk with referral sources.
- Provide informational/marketing materials for referral sources.

PRE-GROUP SCREENING

Once referrals start coming in, the applied RPG provider will want to screen potential clients to ensure that they will be a good fit for the group. Considerations should be made for the diagnosis, attitudes toward gaming, and other potential factors such as scheduling and availability. The applied RPG provider and the applied GM, if applicable, will want to meet with anyone who is new to the group to review the limits of confidentiality and informed consent one-on-one with each client if the client is a minor, with the party who gave consent on that minor client's behalf (parent, caregiver, etc.).

The applied RPG provider should consider having a brief pitch prepared for each potential member and the consenting party about what the group is, what to

expect from sessions, and what type of feedback (if any) will be provided between group meetings.

Once all the members have been registered, the group is ready to start.

In the hypothetical example with which this book started, the applied RPG provider met with several different potential group members. All but three were found to be a good fit for the group. One was not considered a good fit due to the severity of their symptoms, one because of scheduling conflicts, and another due to not wanting to be involved in a game. During the consenting process, the applied RPG provider received permission for the group members to complete anonymous online surveys, and to use a free digital resource for looking up information about the game. Following all the interviews, the first week's groups were set up and ready go.

Pre-Group Screening Checklist

- Meet with each potential client and consenting party.
- Ensure client is a good fit for group.
- Obtain informed consent from all members.
- Have clients complete anonymous online forms (optional).

PLANNING THE FIRST MEETING

When getting ready to run session zero, there are many things for the applied GM to consider. The first is what type of adventure they will be running. Is the applied GM going to home brew their world, use a pregenerated adventure, use a Collaborative Home-Brew System, or some combination of all three? The applied GM will also want to think through how character creation will be handled and how to help new players learn the gaming system. Next, they will want to prepare the safety tools they will be using and determine how such tools will be used with their clients. The applied GM will define the behavioral expectations for the group, and explain how conflict and challenges will be managed. They will also wish to consider how to provide information to their clients about online tools that they are using (if any).

In the example group I created, I used a Collaborative Home-Brew System to build the world and create the adventure for the game. I used an online tool to

help with character creation, which took place during session zero. Additionally, I used the dynamic safety tool method for their group. Each player was given a bag of poker chips with symbols taped to them to indicate how they were feeling —a green chip with a smiling emoji to indicate they are okay, a yellow chip with an indifferent emoticon (😑) to indicate the topic is nearing a line for them, a blue chip with a pause symbol on it to indicate the need for a pause, and a red chip with an "X" on it to indicate that they need a full stop. I used a specific dice tray for players to toss their tokens into when needed. I also used an anonymous form for players to fill out following the first session that allowed each player to communicate any boundaries they did not want to share with the group. Finally, I created a form that players took home to remind them of the rules and boundaries for the group. This form will include my instructions for being contacted between sessions.

Planning the First Meeting Checklist

- Choose what type of adventure to use.
- Decide on character creation method.
- Prepare safety tools.
- Provide online forms to players.
- Distribute handouts to remind players of rules, safety tools, and boundaries.

RUNNING SESSION ZERO

The first meeting of any applied TTRPG group will be session zero. The group will likely start with introductions and a discussion of what the players can expect. The group will be introduced to the gaming world, either through a description from the applied GM or through making it themselves using collaborative home brew. Next, the players will create their characters. Finally, safety tools will be discussed and practiced, and the group will start defining their topic boundaries. The applied GM will give the players their homework and access to any online resources, including forms to be filled out, if applicable. If the applied GM is using player journals, they would want to hand out such resources during session zero. Following the meeting, the applied GM will need

to document what occurred during the session, including writing group notes for each participant.

For the example group, there were four members ranging in ages from 14–16, all of whom were diagnosed with various anxiety disorders. Of the four members, two also had a comorbid diagnosis of ASD, and one had a comorbid diagnosis of ADHD. During the welcome, each participant introduced themselves and discussed their experience with TTRPGs. All had never played before, though two were familiar with the game from watching live-play Twitch streams. I reviewed the rules and expectations for the group and explained the limits of confidentiality and informed consent. I then started to discuss how the world would be built. The group was led through the Collaborative Home-Brew System and developed a story idea that they wanted to explore. Following world building, the members created their characters and the players were shown how to access and use the online tools. After character creation, I discussed the concept of safety tools and the group listed their red, yellow, and green topics.

I then provided the opening situation that the characters would be in for this story—they were attending a carnival. I asked each player to think about why their character was at the carnival, what goal the character wanted to accomplish at the carnival, and any other details for their backstory. Players were also asked to consider how they wanted to see their characters grow and develop over the course of the remaining nine sessions. Following the group meeting, I worked on fleshing out the campaign plan to include rough notes of what story beats I hoped to reach at each session. Following the campaign planning, I wrote notes for each client, mentioning the client's goals and other notable behaviors from the session.

Running Session Zero Checklist

- Welcome the group.
- Review the limits of confidentiality.
- Set expectations.
- Introduce the game's setting.
- Create characters.
- Review safety tools.
- Establish topic boundaries.
- Provide access to online tools (if applicable).

- Give players their first homework.
- Document the session via notes for clients.

RUNNING GAMING SESSIONS

For each subsequent group meeting, the applied GM will need to prepare their adventure and consider what therapeutic principles are going to be woven into the narrative of the game. Some applied GMs might use check-in questions, or specific lessons on therapeutic principles for each session. The applied GM will want to define these principles and questions. If the applied GM is having their players do homework between sessions, deciding how to check in and use the homework will be important as well. Miniature figures (minis) and maps for their groups will need to be prepared, if they are being used.

Session preparation will vary depending on what type of game the applied GM is running. If it is an online game, the applied GM may have handouts or items to message to players. For face-to-face games, the applied GM likely will want to have dice, scratch paper and pencils, and any props or other materials ready to go. As the game is running the applied GM will also want to have a way to record notable behaviors; this might be in the form of taking quick notes, or having a cofacilitator record behavioral observations during the group. If the applied GM is assigning homework, they will want to do so before the end of each session, likely with a discussion of how the homework will apply at the next meeting. Following each meeting of the group, the applied GM will need to do appropriate documentation for each group member and also write notes to remind themselves where the story is and what their goals are for the next meeting. Some applied GMs might also email parents or consenting parties to provide updates on the progress of group members.

For the example group, I had a weekly question that the players needed to answer for their character each week as homework. The players who completed the homework were given an inspiration die they could use during that session. Each week I reviewed the treatment goals for each player and the overall goals of the group, then examined narratively where the story was and tried to find situations that they could weave into the narrative to provide opportunities for each player to practice needed skills.

Running Gaming Sessions Checklist

- Review the story's progress.
- Review therapy goals for the group.
- Develop encounters that progress the narrative while also providing opportunities to practice skills for the group.
- Prepare any materials needed for the group.
- Choose a check-in or review question (if applicable).
- Document behaviors during the group.
- Assign homework (if applicable).
- Document the progress of both the group and individual players.

FINAL SESSION

As the applied TTRPG group comes to a close, the applied GM will want to ensure that they are able to bring the group to a suitable conclusion. The plot of the story that is being told in the campaign should come to a satisfying ending, and hopefully in such a way that the players are given the opportunity to reflect on what they have learned and how they have grown as a result of being in the group. For some applied GMs, it might be advisable to have each player give a farewell from their PC to the other characters in the group, before having the player do the same for the other players.

In the example group, I assigned each group member to create a gift in character for another PC. The members drew names so no PC would be left out. Once the story reached its conclusion, the narration led to the group parting for a time but wanting to give one another keepsakes. Then each player described the small gift that their PC had made for the other character and why. There were many tears and the group processed what it was like to go on an adventure with friends. In closing, the group discussed what they would be taking away from the experience, and I gave each group member a set of their own dice as a way to celebrate all they had achieved in the group.

Final Session Checklist

- Ensure a satisfying close to the narrative.
- Discuss growth and lessons learned over the course of the group.
- Celebrate the journey and the growth.
- Complete any final charting and documentation.

GLOSSARY

Advantage: When a player rolls the dice twice and is able to take the higher dice roll.

After-Action Review (AAR): A structured discussion following an event in which the group discusses what went well, what did not go well, and what lessons they learned for the next encounter.

Bleed-In: When emotions and or experiences move from the player to their character in an RPG/LARP.

Bleed-Out: When the emotions and experiences move from the character to the player in an RPG/LARP.

Campaign: The full story that is told through playing an RPG from start to finish. They can be contained in a single session, or take months or years to complete.

Collaborative Home-Brew System: A method of world building developed by Johns and Davis of Game to Grow (2018) where the GM and players work together to create a map, name features on the map, then create gossip and rumors that will be used as the foundation for the campaign.

Crunchy: A term used in RPGs to indicate a gaming system that has a lot of rules.

d20, d12, d10, d8, d6, d4: Indicates a die and the number of sides it has. The “d” stands for die and the number indicates the number of sides.

Disadvantage: When a player rolls the dice twice and has to take the lower roll.

Dungeon Master (DM): A proprietary term from Wizards of the Coast to indicate the person who runs the game of *Dungeons &*

Dragons.

Dynamic Safety Tools: Safety tools developed by Connell that are utilized in RPGs where a variety of different tokens are used by players to communicate that they are doing well, would like a pause from the narrative, feel the narrative is reaching a boundary, or feel that it has crossed a boundary.

Emotional Permeability: Proposed clinical term to replace bleed when discussing how emotional experiences can move between the player and character in an applied RPG setting.

Experience Points (XP): These are points that are awarded in RPGs and then used by players to level up their PCs.

Extrinsic Motivation: When one is motivated into action through external stimuli.

Facilitator: Term used in group therapy to indicate the clinician who leads the group.

Flow: A term developed by Csikszentmihalyi to indicate a state in which a person is encountering challenges that, while difficult, are not insurmountable.

Fluff: An RPG term used to describe a gaming system with fewer rules, or with rules that act more like guidelines.

Frame: A specific way of understanding the world.

Game Master (GM): This is a generic term used to describe the person in an RPG who acts as the narrator and manages the world in which the story takes place.

Gaming System: In RPGs this is the term used to describe the rules of the game that is being played. Thus *D&D* is a different gaming system from *Kids on Bikes*.

Health Points (HP): A number used in many RPGs to represent the health of a PC or NPC. When a character has 0 HP, they are noted as either being unconscious or dead.

Home Brew: When a GM creates something on their own for a game. Home-brew items can include spells, monsters, worlds, or magical/technical items.

Immersion: The state one enters when they are fully absorbed in an activity or narrative.

In Character: When players are role-playing with one another as their characters.

Inspiration: RPG term that indicates the player has a bonus of some kind, typically this is getting an additional die to roll, on a check within the game.

Intrinsic Motivation: When one is motivated into action through internal stimuli.

Lines and Veils: An early RPG safety tool initially used to address romance or sex in games. Players were allowed to state their lines, topics that would not be a part of the game, and their veils, topics which occurred in the world but were not role-played out at the table.

Live-Action Role-Play (LARP): A type of RPG in which the players dress up as their characters and act out the actions of their characters.

Luxton Technique: A safety tool in which players can stop the narrative to request a change to how topics are handled or what actions are taken by the group.

Magic Circle: An imaginary space in which the game rules take precedence over the rules one follows day-to-day.

Meta-gaming: When a player has their character act upon knowledge that the character would have no way of knowing.

Module: A complete adventure typically written for a specific gaming system that outlines a whole story from start to finish. Modules often include NPCs, specific magic items, maps, and all the information needed to run encounters.

Nonplayer Character (NPC): Characters inhabiting the gaming world that are controlled by the GM rather than by any of the players.

Off the Rails: When the GM has an idea of where the story will go and the players choose to take the story in another direction. Typically, this means that the GM is creating much of what the players

are encountering as they go.

On the Rails: When a gaming group is following the story as the GM planned. Often being on the rails is not seen as a desired method of playing.

One-Shot: A complete standalone game/campaign that is played in a single session.

Out of Character: When the players are talking about what is occurring in the gaming world as themselves rather than as their characters. Out-of-character comments might be used to explain why a character is behaving as they are, or for the player to ask a clarifying question.

Player Character (PC): A character in a gaming world that is controlled by a single player.

Psychosocial Moratorium: A situation in which real-world consequences are significantly lowered.

Railroading: Term used to describe when the GM is seen as forcing the players to follow a predetermined path within the gaming world.

Role-Playing: When a player speaks as though they are their character.

Role-Playing Game (RPG): A type of game in which the players take on the persona of a character within the world of the game. Can be played on computers, on a tabletop, or in a live-action setting.

Rules as Written (RAW): A by-the-letter method of following the rules in a gaming system. The term is often used when discussing rules that might be altered for various reasons (e.g., “per RAW you would have disadvantage, but that does not make sense for this situation, so it is just a straight roll”).

Safety Tools: An agreed upon set of rules that are used to allow players to communicate discomfort with a topic or theme that is arising in the game.

Sandbox: Used to describe a more open-world setting in which the players can influence and change the world as they play in it.

Satanic Panic: A movement that started in the 1980s in which people were concerned that playing tabletop games, particularly *D&D*, would lead the players to Satan worship.

Session: A single gaming meeting that is part of a larger campaign.

Tabletop Role-Playing Game (TTRPG): Term for an RPG that is played using a tabletop format, such as *Dungeons & Dragons*.

Theory of Mind: The ability for someone to understand that another person has a distinct and different worldview from themselves.

Therapeutic Encounter: An in-game opportunity for players to practice behaviors that they are learning within the applied RPG group setting.

World Building: The act of creating a fictitious world either for fictional writing or for playing a game in.

X-Card: A type of RPG safety tool in which players are allowed to use a card with an “X” on it to fully stop the narrative of the game due to the topic being unsettling or trigging to them. The game immediately will narratively pivot in a new direction, no questions asked.

APPENDIX A: SUGGESTIONS FOR RESEARCH

As noted continually in this work, there is little to no research on the applied use of RPGs. There are many aspects of the applied use of RPGs that need investigation. The following are a collection of possible research projects around the use of applied RPGs that could be explored.

Are RPGs an effective tool to use in therapy when compared to treatment as usual?

This is the foundational question; does the applied use of RPGs actually help those who use it at least as well as other helpful therapy models for a given diagnosis? It would be good to examine the learning and application of social skills for those on the autism spectrum, measures of self-esteem and self-worth for those with anxiety and/or depression, and to measure team building skills. It would also be illuminating to examine the difference between those who engage in treatment as usual, those who play a regular RPG, and those who play an applied RPG.

Does playing applied RPGs improve theory of mind?

One of the potential benefits for the applied use of RPGs is how it can help the players engage in activities based on theory of mind. However, does playing RPGs lead to actual development of theory of mind skills? If theory of mind is improved, in what way is it bettered? If theory of mind is augmented, how can that inform us about how to improve theory of mind skills in applied RPGs?

How are RPG memories encoded, and is this encoding different from autobiographical memory?

When players discuss the amazing feats their characters did in a game they do not discuss these memories in terms of “Do you recall that time our characters

were storming the castle?" Instead they use phrasing such as "Do you recall when we were storming that castle?" The use of the first-person pronoun is notable. How are gaming memories encoded? What could that encoding tell us about how games help players learn non-gaming skills?

Are intervention methods (CBT, ACT, dialectical behavior therapy, etc.) that are taught using applied RPGs at least as effective as teaching these methods with treatment as usual?

It seems probable that skills taught through the medium of applied RPGs would be at least as well learned as those taught in a psychoeducational group. There might even be reason to assume that skills taught through an applied RPG would be learned better than those taught in a psychoeducational group as an applied RPG group tends to be more fun and engaging than an educational group.

Does pairing an RPG with a treatment as usual group increase compliance and treatment outcomes?

This could be done through several groups; one group could attend a treatment-as-usual psychoeducational group followed by a nontherapeutic RPG. Another group could do the same but their RPG would work to include the lesson that the players learned that week in the psychoeducational group. While a third group does not use the psychoeducational group at all and instead entwines the lessons right into the applied RPG. Are the outcomes different? If so, how? What can the results tell us about learning, specifically about learning through applied RPGs?

Do participants in an applied RPG group drop out at lower rates than participants in groups that do treatment as usual?

As applied RPG groups engage in play and are thus rewarding to participate in, it seems likely that there would be a lower rate of dropouts in such groups. Tracking attendance rates could help inform whether participants are attending applied RPGs more, less, or at the same rates as other forms of group therapy.

Does role-playing a PC facilitate the participant to be more engaged in a role-play than if they were role-playing as themselves?

Participants in groups might feel socially awkward during role-plays in which they are acting as themselves demonstrating a task. Using the persona from their

PC might improve the engagement in role-playing desired behaviors and interventions. If there is a difference, what is that difference? Is the participant more, less, or equally as engaged as when they role-play as themselves? Such findings would not only be helpful for applied RPGs but for classroom-based role-plays, vocation-based role-plays, and so on.

What is the progression of PCs like for most players? Do players of RPGs tend to follow a similar trend around the type of characters they start playing? If so, what is this pattern?

This research question could possibly be answered using a series of qualitative interviews of those who have been playing RPGs for several years and have played at least five different long-term PCs throughout their time playing. A structured interview could help to understand the type of characters that the player has played in the past, and might show if there is a trend in the evolution of characters that the player has created.

Does having XP tracking visible in real time during gameplay significantly impact the behaviors of the players?

Some applied GMs will note XP gains on a whiteboard that is easily viewable to all the players in real time, while other applied GMs note XP gains on a piece of paper behind their GM screen. Does having the real-time feedback of seeing XP gains, and possibly losses, significantly impact in session player behaviors? And if so, for what diagnoses? It is expected that for more attention-type challenges, including ADHD, ASD, and so forth, having real-time feedback might be more effective. It is less clear if real-time feedback would significantly impact groups with diagnoses of PTSD, anxiety, and so forth.

Looking at the top-selling board games in five different countries, do these games coordinate with the values of that culture?

Begy's 2018 review of board games and culture had limited research to pull from. Examining how board games reflect current culture might be helpful for understanding how games were influenced by cultures throughout history. If there is a relation between local or regional culture and the games played this might interest those studying anthropology and sociology as well as those studying psychology.

Though video games have undergone scrutiny from society at large it does not seem to have ever reached the same level as it did for RPGs. What caused this difference? Is the public opinion on RPGs part of why research on RPGs has lagged well behind research on video games?

Video games have been vilified in popular media, as have RPGs, yet video games have persisted, and have benefited from many randomized studies being done on them. What are some of the possible root causes of this difference? What can the field of psychology and gaming studies learn from this discrepancy so that other potentially powerful psychological tools are not ignored?

In her book The Functions of Role-Playing Games (2010) Bowman suggests nine PC archetypes. When observing players making characters, do these nine archetypes appear and if so at what frequency do they appear?

The foundational theories on the uses of RPGs by Bowman have helped to pioneer the field. Notably there have been no randomized controlled studies that have utilized these theories. It would be helpful for research to examine the function of Bowman's theories in practice to determine if the theories need to be adjusted based upon research findings.

Does playing RPGs improve empathy at least as much as reading fiction?

Reading fictional works has been shown to help improve empathy (Mar et al., 2009), and it is reasonable to assume that playing an RPG would also improve empathy as much as, if not more, than reading. Does the type of PC (premade vs. player made) that is being played impact the empathy that is being built, and if so in what way?

Do players of RPGs utilize the safety tools at different rates? If so, which are the most used and which are the least? Do the safety tools effectively help players communicate their needs in the game?

The use of safety tools is needed in applied gaming; however, it is unknown how helpful such tools are. It seems running a game without an agreed upon rule system that allows players pause the game if they need a break is not advisable. Given all the safety tools that have been developed and that are widely used, are they all effective at helping players stand up for themselves? If so, are there any differences between the primary safety tools? How do dynamic safety tools compare to the three primary tools used in the community?

Does using the Collaborative Home-Brew System increase player engagement with the game compared to players using a pregenerated module?

Johns and Davis as part of Game to Grow (2018) proposed that using a Collaborative Home-Brew System increases player engagement with play. Is this the case though? Are players more likely to engage with a gaming world they helped to create or would they engage more with a world that was designed to have internal consistency?

Do players react negatively to being railroaded when playing RPGs?

It is common for GMs to believe that railroading (forcing their players to follow a given narrative) creates a bad gaming experience for their players. Does it though? Using measures of player engagement (behavioral observations, interviews, etc.) is player engagement negatively impacted by GMs railroading?

APPENDIX B: FULL DIALOGUE FROM DOCUMENTATION SESSION EXAMPLE

The following example, while based upon the author's experiences, is a fabrication.

As a reminder, the group consists of the following players:

- Julie, age 16, diagnosed with social anxiety, she has a history of being bullied. She is playing a half-elf rogue named Adyra.
- Cara, age 14, diagnosed with anxiety and ASD. She is playing a dragonborn bard named Urza.
- Maura, age 15, diagnosed with anxiety and ADHD. She is playing a halfling barbarian named Keira.
- Olivia, age 17, diagnosed with social anxiety. She is playing an aasimar cleric named Dina.

The session opened with the applied GM leading the group through a mindful breathing activity where they focused on the feeling of air as it filled their lungs, and then as they slowly exhaled. They then got ready to play.

GM: Okay, who would like to do our recap?

Cara: I will! So, we learned that a rare and powerful magic item is in the ruins of a castle deep within the woods. Urza was able to charm a few people in the town into giving us information about where the ruins were. We found them and battled some rats that had made the entrance their home before we ended last time.

GM: Great job. Take an inspiration roll. As we start tonight, you approach a pair of doors each with a face. Once you are within 10 ft (3.5 m), the eyes open and they say in unison, "One of us leads you toward your goal, the other on the errand of a fool. One of us speaks

only truth, the other only lies. Ask one question each to determine which to choose!”

Olivia: So, we have to choose which door by only asking each door one question?

GM: Correct.

Cara: Aww man, this seems like something my character would be really good at, but I totally suck at riddles!

Julie: Hey it’s okay; Urza totally would get this one no issue. But it’s also a logic puzzle so that means intelligence. So perhaps she would ask for help from Dina because she is a knowledge cleric?

Maura: That makes sense, and besides we can all work together to solve this. Urza might be able to figure this out on her own, but Cara does not have to. We as a group can all help before your character takes action.

Olivia: Okay so Dina totally would know a good logic question to ask. But my intelligence is not nearly as good as hers, so what do we all think would help?

Cara: Maybe something simple like “What color is my shirt?”

Julie: That might work!

GM: Recall though, just figuring out which is lying and which is telling the truth will not tell you what is beyond their door.

Julie: Well, shoot.

Maura: Wait, wasn’t this riddle in a movie? The character asked the same question to both guards to figure out the way forward.

(The players talk a bit trying to figure out the movie, then what question would help before making their choice.)

Cara (as Urza) to the Left Door: Which door leads to the fool’s errand?

GM as Left Door: The right.

Cara (as Urza) to the Right Door: What is 2 + 2?

GM as Right Door: 6

Cara: Ha! Okay, so the Left Door tells the truth, and the Right Door lies. We go through the Left Door!

GM: You find that a pathway deeper into the dungeon waits beyond. As you pass the Left Door says, “Congratulations.”

Cara: Oh man, YES! We got it right!

GM: You continue on.

(The players navigate through several halls before coming to a long, straight hallway.)

GM: As you turn the bend, you see before you a straight hall going for at least 100 ft (30.5 m).

Julie: I want to look for traps.

GM: Roll for investigation.

Olivia: Can I assist them?

GM: Roll with advantage.

Julie: Great! First roll 7, ew. Second is an 18, so with my bonus that is a 22!

GM: What you see looking down the hall are slits and holes throughout the corridor. Many set up at a height that would be effective for traps of various kinds. Make an intelligence roll with advantage as Dina is helping you.

Julie: 11 and 14, so 15 total.

GM: Your character has heard of these types of traps before. It is a gauntlet. This hall is set to have traps go off as soon as you all start moving down it, and there is a timer. (GM pulls out an hourglass.)

GM: When time runs out, the hall will flood, and your characters will die if they have not reached the other side. The gauntlet will start as soon as your characters step into the hall, your path is before you. Escape is possible in this moment, but once you step forward the way out will close and your only path will be ahead of you.

Maura: No way we are going back; we need to go forward. (Maura looks at the hourglass.) How long is that anyway?

GM: You, and your character, have no way of knowing.

Maura: Okay, well shoot. So, the traps start going off as soon as we step in. How do we all survive? How is everyone's HP looking?

Cara: I'm at full.

Julie: I'm only down 5.

Olivia: I'm at full but my full isn't even half of your HP (to Maura).

Maura: So, no doubt my character can survive this, I can go into a rage and make a run for it. Our biggest worries are Dina and Urza, they also have all the healing spells.

Julie (looking through her character sheet): Don't we have a portable hole?

Cara: Yeah. I think my character is holding it, it's got our treasure in it

right now.

Julie (to GM): So, with all the treasure how much room is left in it?

GM: You could probably fit one or two of you in it, at most two. Having two would use up the air much faster though.

Olivia (as Dina): Okay so myself and Urza should go into the hole while Adyra and Keira make a run for it?

Cara (as Urza): I'm down with this plan.

GM: Okay spreading out the hole will start the timer for the gauntlet. So, when you are all ready, let me know.

Julie (looking nervously over their character sheet): Yeah?

GM: Everyone recall what we practiced at the start of the session today.

Cara: Oh yeah, this would probably be a great time to practice that deep breathing! (Cara starts to practice deep breathing and rest of the group joins in.)

Julie: Okay I'm good now. GM, can my character dodge the obstacles?

GM: They can try to, most of the traps are on a timer of some kind, so there is a chance of success at dodging them.

Maura (as Keira): Okay so I'll spread out the hole while Dina and Urza climb in. Adyra, you watch what the traps are doing. As soon as I close the hole, I'm going to go into a rage. Then I will run to the other side and open the hole again, I'll come back and get you if you need me to. Everyone ready? (The other players nod.) I open the portable hole.

GM (immediately flips over the hourglass): As the hole is spread out, you all hear clinking and whooshing sounds.

Olivia (as Dina): I jump into the hole!

Cara (as Urza): I jump in behind her and take a big breath of air.

Maura (as Keira): I close the hole then go into a rage.

Julie (as Adyra): While that is going on, I am looking down the hall. What do I see?

GM: Make a perception check.

Julie: 8, so 12.

GM: The first thing you see is gouts of fire that obscure your view farther down the hall, but you do catch sight of other things moving in the corridor. Keira, you now have the hole closed.

Maura (as Keira): I rage and start running down the hall.

GM: Now because you are raging, I'm just going to roll damage for each of the traps as you are not doing anything to avoid them.
Maura: That is totally fair.
Julie (as Adyra): I'm going to follow close behind until we are through the fire to see if I can get a better idea of what follows the fire.
GM (rolls dice): Okay, you both take 14 points of fire damage.
Maura (as Keira): Just roll it all up for me. I'm not stopping until I'm at the end.
Julie (as Adyra): I'm stopping once I'm clear of the fire and seeing what the barbarian goes through.
GM: Once you get through the fire you stand on a bit of floor. Now you can see that as Keira runs forward, she is pelted by arrows, taking 4 points of piercing damage.
Maura: Halved because of my rage!
GM: As they continue forward you see a large pendulum-like blade swinging from one side to another. It hits her for 14 points of slashing damage, which is rounded down to 7. Keira continues on and you see her trip over something and fall facedown into a shallow pit of some kind, taking 7 points of acid damage. She gets back up, continues on, and is again pelted by arrows before reaching the end of the hall, taking another 15 points of piercing damage rounded down to 8.
Maura: Okay, so that was 38 points of damage for me. Ouch, but I'm okay. Once I'm on the other side I spread out the hole to let Dina and Urza out.
Julie (as Adyra): Okay, I go forward and try to avoid the arrows as best I can.
GM: How do you go about doing so?
Julie (as Adyra): I look for where the holes are and try to weave between them to the best of my ability.
GM: Make a perception check.
Julie: 12 so 16.
GM: It takes you a moment (shakes the hourglass, so some more sand falls down quickly) but you are able to evade, taking only 3 points of piercing damage. You next approach the swinging pendulum.
Julie (as Adyra): I wait a moment to get the timing.
GM: Make an intelligence check.

Julie: 12, so 13.
GM: You think you get the timing down, but you are hit taking 1 point of slashing damage. You come to the acid pit.
Julie (as Adyra): I want to try and parkour over it!
GM: Make an acrobatics check.
Julie: 13, so 17!
GM: Without issue, you run and bounce across the walls avoiding the trip wire and acid pool.
Cara (looking at the hourglass): The sand is almost out (as Urza). Hurry!
Julie (as Adyra): Shoot, I don't try to avoid the last trap I just run as fast as I can to get to everyone so we can escape!
GM: You see the door starting to slide shut and you know your time is running out. You throw caution to the wind and sprint for your companions who have made their way safely out of the gauntlet. As you run down the hall you are pelted with arrows and take 13 points of piercing damage. You slide under the door just as it shuts standing with your party. How are you looking?
Julie: I have 8 hit points left!
Cara: I cast cure wounds heal for 6.
Maura (as Keira): You took damage well, friend.
Julie (as Adyra): Thank you, you as well.
Maura (as Keira): (Scoffs) That was but a tickle. For you though, that was good. I am proud that you fight at my side.
Julie: My character smiles (player smiles broadly).
GM: Good job. Let's leave it there for this week!

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“Dr. Megan Connell has masterfully crafted one of the best books for anyone who wants to know about applied tabletop gaming. Her ability to easily explain the nuances and complexities into digestible nuggets is fantastic (and well-needed) for new and old Game Masters alike. If you play tabletop RPGs, you need to own this book.”

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Dr. Megan Connell is a board-certified psychologist who formerly served in the U.S. Army. In her current work she utilizes tabletop role-playing games as a clinical intervention. In 2017 she cofounded the media company Geeks Like Us, which focuses on geek and gaming culture. She is a board member for Geek Therapeutics, a training platform that develops professional programs teaching the inclusion of games in clinical practices. Dr. Connell speaks nationally on the intersection of gaming and psychology. For more information, please visit MeganPsyD.com.

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